



Dynamics Of Change And The Emergence Of Nationalist Ideas In 19th Century Colonial Kumaon In Things To Leave Behind

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Abstract: The aim of this chapter is to explore the transformation and emergence of nationalist ideas in colonial Kumaon through the novel Things to Leave Behind by Namita Gokhale. The colonial advent in Kumaon was a significant event for Kumaoni society in many ways. Namita Gokhale has presented Things to Leave Behind as a historical novel which narrates the legacy of British Raj and the emergence of fragile modernity. The novel chronicles the historical events which took place during British Raj and changed the life of Kumaoni people. The period chosen by Gokhale in her novel was a time of great tumult. The years from 1840 to 1912 saw many significant events in the history of Kumaon. It started with the spreading tentacles of British rule in India. However, the change was slow in coming to the hills but it had a profound impact on the life of Kumaoni people. The novel begins with the year 1856, the year before the Indian Sepoy Mutiny when the Kumaon hills recently started experiencing the wave of British rule. The Sepoy Mutiny was the first step towards a conscious revolt against colonial rule but later dubbed as the 'First War of Independence' because it played a pivotal role in leading the way for the National Freedom Struggle.

Introduction

Namita Gokhale's novel Things to Leave Behind is set in the scenic hills of Kumaon during the period of British Raj in 1800s. The writer has ingeniously selected the time period from 1840 to 1912, when the Kumaon region was experiencing the extensive change like the rest of India. As readers we are drawn towards an era when British Raj pervading more intensely in India by spreading colonialism through education, newspapers and modern technological developments like railway networks. The advent of colonial rule drastically affected the social, political, economic and cultural conditions which had profound impact on women.

In the beginning of the novel, Namita Gokhale has presented a panoramic view of the picturesque Kumaon. Around the lake of Naineetal six native women clad in black and scarlet pichauras circled the lake for three days. Through this ritual they attempted to cleanse Naineetal from the threatening influence of outside people. This threatening influence is referred to as the advent of British rule. The colonial rule began in Kumaon in 1815 after the Gorkha rule. The British captured Kumaon in the wake of Anglo-Nepal war in 1815.

However, in the beginning the objective of the East India Company was not to colonize India. Their aim was simply to gain trade routes. Through trade they wanted to gain from the resources from India to increase supplies back to Britain. Anglo-Nepal war gave them the opportunity to establish actual authority as a ruler. Thus, Kumaon came under the rule of British. At first the hill people supported and welcomed British because they wanted freedom from the cruelties of the Gorkha regime. The people of Kumaon were living miserable conditions and were suppressed by unpopular Gorkha rule.

The Goorkha wars had broken the back of Kumaoni society. The Beesi land tax, the Manga tax, the Subangi Dastur and the extortive Kushahi tax of five rupees per jyula of land on all brahmin castes supported a tyrannical Goorkha administration. Loot and terror were the order of the day. Gadhwali peasants were routinely sold into slavery at the Goorkha chauki, Haradwar. (Gokhale Things to Leave Behind 18)

The Gorkhali rule can be seen as merely the example of imperialism in general which was established at the expense of local people of Kumaon. The 25 long years of oppressive Gorkhali rule had a negative effect on the major aspects of the lives of Kumaoni people whether it is political, social or economic.

The Kumaon region became a place of special attraction for British because of its vast and diverse landscape. The region is embedded with numerous lakes, glaciers, diverse flora and fauna. The Commissioners of Kumaon like Edward Gardner, George William Trail and Henry Ramsay worked for the welfare of the natives. The scholars like E.T. Atkinson explored not only the geographical features but also the history and culture of Kumaon through his Himalayan Gazetteer. Sometimes English scholars try to reassess Indian traditions through their books. The East India Company took over the territories of India and established its political structure to administer and control the state they had colonized. They saw their new ideas and authority of more advanced life as an opportunity to help Indians. They tried to revolutionize and alter the social and cultural arrangement. The colonial rule for the first time discussed certain important aspects of human life, although not in terms of actual practice, at least at the level of theory. They started with the introduction of new ideas and technologies. Their power grew with expanding trade activities and also initiated the process of social and political transformation. They initiated debate for the emancipation of Indian women and the equal legal and civil rights for every person. The most important step taken by British Raj was to introduce education for every stratum of society. The colonial masters worked

with the motive of educating the irrational natives of Kumaon. The modern education provided by British supplied workforce who were employed in the British office.

In the early nineteenth century, there were many Indians working for the British. In the novel also we can find Brahmins like Devi Dutt Pant and Nain Chand Joshi, employed under British office. A new local elite class was emerging among the Kumaoni people who were benefited by the colonial rule. They were influenced by the western notion of living. The upper castes, the Brahmins and Rajputs played an important role in establishing colonial rule the upper caste benefitted from “Company Dispensation” (Gokhale Things to Leave Behind 19) in their own ways. The British were instrumental in introducing new opportunities for the natives. They set up new industries in the plains of Ganges. The trade possibilities were opened for the local people as the local products were exported to Europe. Thus, the changes brought by colonial rule appeared benevolent at first because the “unheard of opportunities seemed to have opened up in trade and employment for the local people.” (17)

The Brahmin Devi Dutt Pant was a government pleader who won the approval of British authorities. He was deeply impressed by the western ideals introduced by new colonial masters. He was a modern man who progressed in his career and became a part of the elite class of Kumaoni society. Devi Dutt Pant adopted western idea of rationality. Though he is a Hindu Brahmin and seems to religiously follow the Brahminical traditions, we can see the reflection of modernity through his attitude. Devi Dutt believed “ferverently in the modern times” (Gokhale Things 25) that the British rulers had introduced in the Kumaon region. Devi Dutt brought up his sister Durga’s orphaned daughter Tilottama. Durga’s orphaned daughter was turning six and the search for a suitable match had begun. When the family’s astrologer saw Tilottama’s horoscope, he gravely declared the effects of her inauspicious ruling stars. The astrologer provided him a solution to counter the evil astrological effects of her mangal dosh. The solution provided by the astrologer enraged Devi Dutt Pant. Being a modern man, he was infuriated by the regressive beliefs of the natives. Colonialism transformed the views of the educated elite of Kumaon and Devi Dutt was one of them. He believed that the orthodox traditions followed by local people hinder the development of Kumaoni society. Devi Dutt advocated for the need to renounce Kumaoni conservative practices and follow the colonial notions of modernity:

‘We live in modern times!’ he exclaimed. ‘The white men are building trains that hurtle like a hundred speeding horses. They have invented electric lights that shine like moons in the night. It is time to leave this ancient darkness behind. It is me, pleader Devi Dutt Pant, a pundit and a Brahmin and master of the four Vedas, who says this. Mark my words, you astrologer, who feeds on the misfortunes of the weak and the vulnerabilities of the foolish!’ (Gokhale Things 24)

The mountains of Kumaon were explored largely by British adventurers appointed by the East India Company or the British Government who were introduced to the strategic role of the Himalayas in strengthening colonial rule. The Englishmen named P. Barron, a wanderer and traveller through the Himalayas had first heard rumours of a

hidden lake in the mountains of Kumaon. The only Englishmen who visited the lake was Commissioner of Kumaon, George William Traill. The native people had done their best to keep the existence of Nainital lake, a sacred spot for the local people where human habitation was prohibited. No houses were allowed to be constructed on the grounds near the lake to avoid polluting the sacred place. The great annual fair of Nanda Devi was held near the lake every autumn. The only British official who was allowed a pilgrimage there was Traill. He was sent by British government to administer the place. He was inspired by the beauty of the lake and fell in love with the mountains. He kept the existence of the lake a secret to protect it “jealousy from the outside world” (Gokhale Things 11). Traill contemplated that the unravelling of the secret of the lake's existence would attract European visitors. He considered the interference of Europeans “a ‘public calamity’ and successfully kept any knowledge of the lake from his countrymen” (11). The idea of a secret lake enthralled and excited P. Barron. He was determined to discover the divine lake and organised a trek towards the suspected area of Nainital. A new settlement was established around the lake in Nainital. The new hill station flourished very quickly. The land of Nainital which once belonged to the people of Kumaon, now belonged to “another time, another people” (Gokhale Things 17).

The brutal caste system that was prevalent in India proved to be a major reason for the advent of British rule in India. The upper caste played a pivotal role in the manipulation of Kumaoni politics from Chand rule to colonial rule. In the novel Gokhale has presented Brahmins as the most influential in Kumaoni society due to their high caste status. The famous Harshdeo Joshi of Kumaon “had been the legendary manipulator of Kumaon politics, first abetting the invading Goorkhali forces against the hapless Chand rajas, then abiding the wily political agent William Fraser to bring about British rule” (Gokhale Things 26-27). Brahmins were a privileged class who used to hold high posts in the royal court. They first came in contact with the British and helped them in establishing their authority. When British first gained their foothold in Kumaon to expand their territory, it provided the upper caste the opportunity to benefit from them. The people were fascinated with their methods of political and social administration. However, many natives of the region were against colonial rule and demanded others also to be loyal to their own race. But the natives like Devi Dutt Pant were against it and dismissed these arguments as “foolish talk” (26). He was enjoying the favour of British officials as a government pleader in the district court. His legal practice “was proceeding very satisfactorily, and he saw no reason to put it at risk” (26).

Though the majority of people in Kumaon were compliant to colonial rule, there were many Kumaonis who were against the British. East India Company's rule from 1757 to 1857 had created a lot of discontent among the various segments of Kumaoni society. Badri Dutt Upreti was one such Kumaoni Brahmin who was against the British rule. He was Tilottama's deceased father's younger brother and married to the younger daughter of the famous Kumaoni Brahmin Harshdeo Joshi. His father-in-law had proved his loyalty to the British by aiding them in establishing their rule in Kumaon. Badri Dutt's abomination towards his father-in-law was known to everyone in his family. He would himself declare Harshdeo Joshi as “selfish and unpatriotic” (Gokhale Things 26). He

considered Hardhdeo Joshi to be a traitor like Vibhishan and Jaichand because he deceived the people of his own land and allowed the outsiders to capture the land of Kumaon. These conversations opposing British were continuously repeated in the Burra Bazaar house whenever Badri Dutt visited Nainital. 'We Paharis revere loyalty more than any other virtue. But we should be loyal to our own race! Better, I say, to die with Ravana or Prithviraj Chauhan than bask in false, treacherous victories where we give our land and our future away,' he would continue, raising his voice to a dramatic pitch. (Gokhale Things 26). But his belief was not welcomed by the supporters of British rule. He was labelled as "rash and rebellious" (25) by the upper caste Brahmins. He was an embarrassment to both his own family in Kashipore and to his wife's large and extended clan.

The voice of revolt against colonial rulers in the plains of Hindustan was also echoed across the hills of Kumaon. Badri Dutt Upreti's hatred for the British rulers was well known among the natives of Kumaon. His alliance with the rebel groups was no secret in the valley of Kumaon. Also, Anand Singh Pahrtyal and Bishan Singh Karavat were reportedly talking against the unjust rule of colonial masters. In the plains when rebels were fighting bravely against the British forces, the hills were experiencing the pouring in of European evacuees. The women and children were engulfed with fear due to the bloodshed they had experienced. They were escorted to the hills on horseback by the soldiers.

The Revolt of 1857 challenged the authority of British rule but could not succeed in throwing the British out of Indian territory. Not all people of India supported the revolt. However, the revolt to some extent succeeded in creating a discussion among the scholars in the other parts of the world. Regarding the nature of the revolt Disraeli, an MP in the House of Commons argued that, "the Indian disturbance is not a military mutiny, but a national revolt" (Metcalf, 73). Thus, with time the historians started terming the revolt as the First War of Indian Independence which may be a topic of dispute. But we cannot deny the fact that it acted as a precursor to India's freedom struggle.

The developments after the events of 1857 changed the structure of governance and strengthened the control of British over the land of Indian subcontinent. The Government of India Act of 1858 was enacted under which the rule of East India Company came to an end. The direct control of Indian territory slipped into the hands of the British Crown. The nineteenth century brought with it various reforms vis a vis administration, social issues, free press, technology etc. which appeared to be beneficial at first. The new government introduced many technological inventions such as the establishment of railways, roads and communication networks. These gradual transformations by the colonial government appeared to be beneficial for the colonized people. But in reality, they saw it as an opportunity to maximize their control and exploit the colonized state. In the same year of 1870, the project of Great Trigonometrical Survey was established to measure the entire Indian subcontinent precisely with the use of scientific tools. The complete geographical knowledge of Indian territory was necessary for British administration for the purpose of collecting revenue.

The major characteristics of this period was the introduction and proliferation of modern education which had a perpetual impact on society. In pre-modern India the right to education was limited to the upper caste, particularly Brahmins. The large section of the society especially lower caste and women were deprived of education. However, the new system of education reached even to the lowest strata of the society and led to awakening of the Indian masses. The region of Kumaon experienced the same phenomenon as the rest of the country. The effect of social change was also evident in Kumaon. In Kumaon, education became the new embodiment of status. Although, English education was made essential by British government to secure jobs in the government sector. British government required native men who were English educated, to work at subordinate posts. Many scholars are of the opinion that education under British rule came as a blessing for the people of India. It was responsible for the emergence of European ideas and knowledge systems. Moreover, it also provided access to modern literature in English language which is one of the richest in the world. According to Aparna Basu, "The primary purpose of introducing English had been educational. But the new language bringing with it a new world of ideas and leading to new political institutions developed a unity which had not been recognised before and English as an emblem and medium of expression of that unity." (Growth of Education 229)

Missionary education played a significant role in leading social change in the 19th century. Initially the colonial masters were not very attentive towards the caste of education. In 1835 Macaulay's minute articulated the famous 'downward filtration theory' which advocated the introduction of education for a few of the natives. After this period the large numbers of educational activities were conducted by Christian missionaries in Kumaon. Mission schools were opened in the region. These schools not only provided modern education but also aimed to teach skills to the children of Kumaon. The opening of Eden Ashram in Sat Tal provided the opportunity for the children of neighbouring villages to avail education.

Christian missionaries were not only involved in circulating education but also advocated for social reforms and assisted in generating a new consciousness in Kumaon. The missionaries took initiative to educate people who were from the downtrodden strata of the society (Mayhew, 10). Eden Ashram was surrounded by villages which were inhabited by Doms, the untouchable castes in Kumaoni society. The children of Shilpkars, a sub-caste of Doms, attended Ashram school in large numbers. The Ashram was visited by a low caste priest who used to stay in the villages of Doms and preach to them about the different aspects of religion. He met Rosemary and was inspired by her kindness towards the Dom community. He said that she would go to heaven and not because of her Christian God but because of her philanthropic activities for the low caste. He further told Rosemary that the upper caste called the sweeper community 'Mehtars' which is a Persian word for prince and their women were called 'Mehtaranis'. This was their "flattering way to force us to do all the menial work and to eat the scraps of and leftovers of the higher caste" (Gokhale Things to Leave Behind 289) as told by Lal Guru. He believed that modern education and learning English was the only way to elude caste oppressions. Thus, Christian missionaries sowed the seeds of women's education as well as the

concept of upliftment of the depressed classes. The western knowledge gave the power to Kumaoni people to reflect on the evils settled in the form of traditions in the society. This led to the transformation of society and the downtrodden classes started to assert their rights and freedom. The mission tried to work profusely among the untouchables and backward classes to elevate them. They tried to elevate the status of downtrodden so that they could gain status equal to upper castes (Dhanaraju, 15).

Also, the nationalist ideas were gradually spreading in Kumaon. Many learned personalities further assisted in propagating the idea of nationalism to the parts of Kumaon. The visit of Swami Vivekanand to Almora made Tilotamma comprehend the meaning of freedom. Swami Vivekanand was a tall, robust, English-speaking and cigar smoking monk. He used to dress in an orange robe and turban, having an inspiring personality. He was the follower of Swami Ramakrishna and stayed in Oakley house in Almora. The people of Almora felt blessed by his presence and would visit him to hear his teachings. He would discuss the idea of freedom and contemplate on mental discipline and philosophy. He was of the opinion that each soul is divine in their own way. An individual could only be free when they manifest their divinity by “work or worship” (Gokhale Things 128). Tilotamma decided to visit him to listen to his views.

The awareness for their freedom found assertion in the establishment of small groups and organisations in various parts of Kumaon. With the spread of education in Kumaon, Almora became the centre of nationalist activities. The new intelligentsia came in close contact with the modern values of liberty, spirit of patriotism and nationalism which were unknown in the region. They started to notice the meaningful role the press could play in the cause of propagating nationalist ideas. The newspapers, magazines and journals helped in building public opinion, educating and awakening the masses by motivating them to acquire their right of freedom. “Almora was, by now, a hive of cultural activity. The ancient capital of the Chand kings, rescued from the years of Goorkhali suppression by the British, had come alive again. English administrators, European artists, Russian explorers and a new breed of educated Indian men, liberal in outlook and committed to Swaraj and a resurgent India, talked and argued with each other.” (Gokhale Things 102),

The voice of journalism soon started to be heard in Almora. The region of Almora was the capital of Kumaon for more than three centuries. It had always been the centre of the region and core of many political and cultural activities. Almora being a remote place was not easily connected to the rest of the country in terms of nationalist awakening. Thus, the people of Kumaon who acquired modern education felt a dire need to establish an institution where they could discuss various ideas related to politics, society, culture and economics of Kumaon.

Consequently, a Debating Club at Almora was established in 1870 to provide a channel for individuals to express their opinions. The Debating Club was under the patronage of Raja Bhim Singh associated with the lineage of the Chand dynasty. The guiding force of this club was a well-known educationist, Pandit Buddhi Ballabh Pant who turned out to be the foundation stone in the making of history of modern Kumaon (Pande 150). At the request of Buddhi Ballabh, the provincial Lieutenant Governor, Sir William

Muir visited Almora. He suggested that to establish a connection with Kumaoni people there should be involvement of a newspaper in the process of modernising Kumaon (Pande 150). The members of the club were inspired by his advice and they decided to launch a newspaper in 1871 named Almora Akhbar.

In Kumaon also the awareness was not limited only to men. The women of Kumaon also took the opportunity of availing modern education. They became conscious of the atrocities faced by women through centuries. The books, magazines and newspapers which were available in Kumaon paved a way for the introduction of modern ideas of freedom from any kind of oppression. The transformation in Kumaoni society was symbolised in the novel through the character of Tilottama. She was an avid reader who never left an opportunity to receive knowledge in any form. She was impressed by the revolutionary thoughts of Pandita Ramabai. Her book *High Caste Hindu Woman* became popular in other parts of the world. Her ideas reached even to the remote areas of Kumaon.

Although women did not participate in the nationalist movement directly, they gave their contribution by deliberating on political issues. The nationalist ideas were discussed even in the households of Kumaon. Some people were sceptical of this change and favoured colonial rule by following the path of conversion. But others were struggling for their freedom as they were aware of the oppressive British rule. Tilottama observed the growth of Swadeshi movement in Kumaon where people were actively participating in it. The women of Kumaon encouraged the cause of the freedom struggle and contributed actively in it.

Namita Gokhale, also through her non-fiction work *Mountain Echoes* focuses on the historical account of Kumaon through the short biography of four Kumaoni women, Shivani (Gaura Pant), Tara Pande, Jeeya (Lakshmi) and Shakuntala Pande. The four women had witnessed the transformation of Kumaoni society and contributed, directly or indirectly, in the propagation of political consciousness among the people. They were represented as the symbol of progressive thought and told us about the struggles of Kumaon against the suppressive rule of British. Jiya in the book remembers the role women of Kumaon played in Indian freedom struggle. She says,

The Freedom Movement came to Kumaon quite gradually, but it was accepted by the Paharis with great enthusiasm. Pandit Badridutt Pande was the foremost freedom fighter of the day. He was a regular visitor to our house, and our attitude to Swarajya was fuelled by his ideas. Later, my third sister Hemlata was married to his son. I remember once, when the women were involved in a protest march, their leader Mrs Hargovind Pant (her husband was a signatory to the Constitution of India) fell ill. My aunt volunteered to lead the protest and carried the Congress flag all the way to the district headquarters. (Gokhale *Mountain Echoes* 111)

This is evident from the fact that the participation of women in the national freedom struggle increased.

Moreover, they also used to compose patriotic songs and sung them to encourage freedom fighters. Another Kumaoni woman in the book, Tara Pande was a Hindi poet who

wrote many patriotic poems for the freedom movement. She was also a social reformer and worked for the education of women. She was a strong opinionated woman who had her independent views and tried to pursue them. Shakuntala Pande in the book recalls that the Independence Movement immensely benefited the high caste women of Kumaon. They got rid of many meaningless and orthodox rituals which led to their freedom from oppression. She says, "Women stepped out, I myself have picketed for the boycott of European clothing outside Naina Devi Temple (Gokhale Mountain Echoes 153). The life history of these women is portrayed through the Gokhale's own personal memories. It is the recollection of women's role as a modernising force as well as their participation in the growth of National Freedom Struggle.

Most of the events related to the freedom movement in Kumaon are expressed in the novel through the perspective of Tilottama. A modern educated woman she was aware of the social and political activities happening around her. Tilottama's views are evident from the fact that although British were against the evils settled in Kumaon, they brought with them the concept of racial divide. The people of Kumaon were already struggling with the evils of casteism but with the advent of British they were introduced to another evil i.e., racism. The activities of Christian missionaries were based on the fact that they believed it was the responsibility of white people to civilize ignorant natives of India. They considered themselves a superior race whose duty was to illuminate the dark minds of native race with the light of knowledge. Rosemary in Eden Ashram followed the same goal of white men. She preached the message of her Lord Christ to the local people of Kumaon making them believe the superiority of her religion. Although there was no caste discrimination in Eden Ashram and both white and brown people lived comfortably with each other. But still there was a hidden superiority in the attitude of white missionaries. "Eden Ashram threw up its own share of questions. The supposedly casteless environs of the Ashram carried the inescapable shadow of racial divides, even though the white and the brown races were in closer conjunction here than in most spots of the still-expanding British empire." (Gokhale Things 289)

Gokhale has presented Tilottama as a person who is proud of her identity. Though she was inspired by the western ideas and education, she was never ready to leave her roots. his life for his country. She proclaimed "My uncle was not hanged but martyred" (Gokhale Things 297) and realised that the revolt was not just a mutiny but a proper struggle for freedom from white men. Thus, we can conclude that Tilottama became aware of her identity not only as a Kumaoni but as an Indian. The She understood the failings of Kumaoni society in the form of caste prejudice but also believed that education could help in its transformation. She realized that British were outsiders in India and it was the duty of Indians to protect their own country. While talking to Rosemary she rejected her identity as an Indian- "We are Indians!" she exclaimed. Not you, but us... and these feathered men don't look like any Indians I know!" (Gokhale Things 299). She remembered her uncle Badri Dutt Upreti who sacrificed feeling of nationalism was intensifying inside her which made her leave Eden Ashram and she resolved to never

return back. She decided to leave her past behind and look only to the future. The future where her country could become free from the control of British rule.

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