

Indra B. Rai. 2017. *There's a Carnival Today*. Translated by Manjushree Thapa. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger.

A literary work that places its characters in a real territory and period can offer a glimpse into the social and political undercurrents of the time and place. *There's a Carnival Today* is a novel that foregrounds its setting in Darjeeling of post-independence India. The novel is titled *Āja Ramitā Cha* in its original Nepali form. “Ramita,” as the translator Manjushree Thapa posits, is rendered semantically as “a combination of a fair, a show, a spectacle or some fun” (p. 228). The word “carnival” aptly captures the atmosphere the author represents as “ramita.”

The “carnival” mentioned in the title alludes to a demonstration staged by some Darjeeling residents against injustice suffered by laborers on a tea plantation. Some workers get into a scuffle with the manager of a plantation regarding demands for raises in wage and better work hours. The workers get charged in court on two separate counts of beating and trying to kill the manager. Local politicians and some Darjeeling residents protest against the exaggerated charges by the legally savvy plantation owner.

The novel situates the socio-cultural milieu of Darjeeling around Janak Man Yonzan and Sita Shrestha. Sita, hailing from Dhankuta, comes to Darjeeling to study and meets Janak after he returns from his study in Calcutta. They marry and settle down in Darjeeling. Janak and Sita's neighborhood provides a window into the lives of people of various backgrounds in Darjeeling. Many characters portrayed in the novel as residents of Darjeeling are Nepali-speaking individuals with their cultural and religious moorings close to those of some hilly parts of Nepal. Janak's creditor Jayabilas is a Marwari, while his friend and a neighbor Ajoy Das is of Bengali origin. Pasang-la, who runs a restaurant nearby, is of Tibetan origin as inferred from food recipes and conversations in the restaurant.

The novel weaves shifting political undertones of Darjeeling in pre- and post-independence India. During the time of Janak's youth, which coincides with recent independence of India from the British rule, most old people harbor mixed feelings towards the British, which contrasts with disdain, if not outright hostility, of Janak's generation. Janak's mother wonders: “Would they really quit a Raj that they made through their own through so much warfare, intelligence and effort, just because people demand it?” (p. 4). Janak

replies: “Our country is our home. You tell me, Aama, what would you do if a thief were to enter our house?” (p. 4). Likewise, members of Janak’s generation deviate substantively from their parents’ generation in their practice of tradition. Ratnabhadur argues with his wife during Amrita’s wedding ceremony about how old *pañce-bājās* (the five instruments) have been replaced by loudspeakers, and how adherence to strict religious rituals has been diluted and poorly followed by young generations.

The political scenario of erstwhile Darjeeling can be inferred from the political activities and aspirations of Janak and Bhudev. Janak’s foray into politics is guided by his ideal of the cataclysmic change brought by peaceful protests led by great figures like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. His political ideals are a reflection of the formative impression left by the independence movement when he was still a teenager. In contrast to Janak, Bhudev often espouses tenacious resistance verging on violence, which Janak finds repulsive. Bhudev encourages people to respond to force with equal force, while Janak’s ideal of peaceful negotiation and protest clashes with Bhudev’s more militant stance. Eventually, Janak is sidelined within his own party.

The novel offers a window into unequal social position and expectations of men and women in the 1950s Darjeeling. Sita attends to domestic niceties of Ravi and Divya and household roles such as cooking, laundering, and welcoming guests. Babuni, wife of MK and neighbor of Sita, also spends most of her time managing household responsibilities. A reader can gauge differential societal expectations about family roles through disparate articulations of Sita and Janak as well as Babuni and MK.

The author manages to articulate the political context of Darjeeling by seamlessly weaving the actual geography, climate, urban structure, and vegetation of the erstwhile Darjeeling in a novelistic flavor. Various geographical and cultural landmarks of the old Darjeeling, which are still extant, are used as backdrops of the novel. Historically, Darjeeling’s identity as a chequered administrative division had led to its disparate spatial identity in various periods. Gorkhalis claimed the region in the beginning of the nineteenth century but ceded it to British India following the Sugauli Treaty of 1816. Many residents in Darjeeling, which is now a District in the State of West Bengal in India, even in the present identify themselves through Nepali language and literature. Their traditions and rituals also resemble those practiced in some parts of Nepal. The author describes tense identities

maintained by Nepali speaking people in Darjeeling. Ambivalence and nostalgia engendered by displacement and detachment from the adjoining homeland signifies difficulties and contradictions faced in a diasporic situation.

Some instances in the novel reveal attendant social and economic hierarchies prevalent in the erstwhile Nepal. Sita's father, Dharmaprasad Shrestha, is from Gairigaun, Dhankuta Bazaar. He owns a large tract of land in adjoining Morang by scheming with powerful bureaucrats. "He settled ten or fifteen Sattar and Dhimal families, who cut down the trees, cleared the jungles, ploughed the fields and dug the irrigation canals. After a year of hard labour, Dharmaprasad Shrestha owned about sixty-five acres of fertile farmland...In those days, when day and night were equally murky in Morang, the Gorkhals committed daylight robbery, looting wealth and life and dignity" (pp. 12–13). This reveals how well-connected families during Rana rule in Nepal (1846–1951) originally from the hills settled in the many forested parts of the Tarai/ Madhes.

The post-independence Darjeeling's social and technological trends are contextualized in various settings of the novel. Yamuna installs telephone in Janak's house and keeps fiddling with the contraption, much to others' dismay. Cinema is portrayed as an amusement and a popular *divertissement* for the people of Darjeeling. Sita and Babuni go to the bazaar mostly during evenings to buy groceries and personal items. Some relatively well-off households can afford domestic help. Birman works as a domestic helper in Sita's household. Some residents, including Janak, own vehicles such as a jeep.

The portrayal of tension among workers and plantation owners can be viewed as a clash of vision on what constitutes social justice. The political aspiration of equity, justice, and social harmony is depicted in a carnivalesque atmosphere of the protest: "People of all caste and kind had shown up at the verandahs, stairs and shuttered windows of the houses to watch the carnival from above. The beautiful women and men crowding around the curtained windows to peer down in disdain, pity, curiosity and delight at the women and girls and boys and elderly men chanting with all their might: They also seemed like a part of the carnival" (p. 211).

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