

Anbika Giri. 2071 v.s. *Māncheko Rañg*. Kathmandu: Sangri-La Books.

Aanbika Giri's *Māncheko Rañg* is set in the final years of Nepal's Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) and the start of the peace process. In the novel's opening chapters the Seven Party Alliance is leading the movement that will end the ten-year war. This might have launched off story with a note of optimism, except that it is narrated through the points-of-view of the youth of a scarred generation.

A lower middle-class college student in Kathmandu, Pawan is on the verge of migrating to Australia. His tickets are bought and his parents have come from the village to bid him farewell. Before he leaves, though, he becomes fixated on a woman he hardly knows. Maya is not only plain – “extremely thin, with sunken eyes and a dry, lustreless face” – but also brusque and standoffish. The reasons for Pawan's fixation on her are inexplicable even to him.

Pawan's tenuous link to Maya is through his childhood friend Binod, a fellow college student and a Maoist who has, in Pawan's words, tried to bring a revolution “on an empty stomach.” Pawan has given Binod companionship in Kathmandu, and also much-needed money and shelter in moments of danger. Pawan's own brother, a Maoist sympathizer, was killed by government security forces several years back. If Pawan refrains from political activism, it is because of his parents' expectations of him: he feels compelled to go abroad mainly to appease them.

The story unfolds when he goes, instead, to Maya's village. Though she is clearly unavailable, Pawan pursues Maya. There's ambiguity around his motivation, but it doesn't seem to be love, exactly. It's closer to compulsion. He is perhaps haunted by the death of his brother. He needs something from Maya – most likely a greater understanding about current events that will complete his own life's story.

Nevertheless, this romantic structure – one of unrequited love – allows the author to open up the story to Maya's world. The largest part of the novel is narrated from Maya's point-of-view; and it retells her life as a Maoist activist, including her encounter with a charismatic party leader, Shikhar, who, to Pawan's dismay, commands her deep and unwavering loyalty.

Maya's story offers a vivid, tense and often distressing picture of the life of a young Maoist woman during the insurgency. She endures test

after political test, gets caught up in battle, loses comrades and suffers disillusionment, including with her party's leadership. The insecurity – and abiding paranoia – among Maoist cadres is among the most chilling aspects of the novel. The possibility of betrayal is never far off; and its consequences can lead to capture, torture or murder.

*Māncheko Raṅg* can be read alone, as the story of a particularly turbulent time in Nepal's recent past, a time which continues to darken the present moment. It can also be read as a contemporary response to Yang Mo's novel *The Song of Youth*.

*The Song of Youth* has circulated widely through Nepal's communist intelligentsia, and is, in particular, a literary staple of the Beijing faction of the Beijing/Moscow divide among Nepal's communists. Published in 1958, it starts with the politicization of a naïve young woman, Lin Daojing, and it follows her transformation into a loyal member of China's communist party. Yang Mo's characters have the same youthful idealism as Giri's; and she depicts the bitter rivalries and internecine battles within China's communist movement in the same terrifying detail as Giri. Each betrayal is a test that Lin Daojing must pass in order to become a good communist. *The Song of Youth* is meant to read unquestioningly, as a heroic tale of the triumph of idealism.

Giri's novel, by contrast, allows the reader enough ironic distance to question Maya's idealism. Indeed, a psychologically attuned reading of the novel would focus on the original trauma that Nepal's communist politics arises from, and also the trauma it goes on to cause.

The original trauma is the absolute rule of the Panchayat era. Maya's father, a school teacher, was arrested when she is still a child; and though she is never explained what happened, Maya overhears enough around the village to ask her mother, "What's a communist?"

Her mother deflects the question with another: "What are you asking?"

"I heard the police took Buwa away because he was a communist, is it true?"

Maya's mother offers no answers.

Indeed, the entire adult world offers few answers to Maya. Whether on the end of the Panchayat and the transition to democracy in 1990 or about subsequent events such as the car accident that killed the Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN–UML)'s rising star Madan Bhandari, the adults in Maya's life mainly remain silent or prevaricate or lie.

After Maya's father begins to associate with Maoist activists, she comes into contact with Shikhar. She is in the fifth grade when the Maoists murder a local landlord. The police arrest innocents for the murder. This prompts Maya to question Shikhar: "Will the proletariat really rise by killing people?"

His answer is familiar to anyone familiar with Nepal's Maoist insurgency: "These things are natural in revolution."

When Maya presses him further, Shikhar admits that he was the one who shot the landlord.

"So it's alright for innocent people [whom the police arrested] to die in jail?" Maya asks in shock.

Shikhar offers another familiar answer: "There's nothing I can do."

Except, of course, there is something he can do. He chooses not to do it. Instead of owning up to his personal culpability, however, he chooses to scapegoat innocents; and Maya's father also goes along with this – for the sake of revolution (another familiar phrase in Nepal).

When, despite her initial outrage, Maya falls back into Shikhar's orbit, she seems to be launching on a personal quest to find the good in her father via the Maoists. Her desire to believe in Shikhar is very plausibly a displacement of her desire to believe in her father.

The rest of the novel follows this personal quest. Maya's childish question, "What's a communist?" matures into, "What's a good communist?" and eventually becomes, "What are the ethics of communism in Nepal?"

This question remains pertinent, given Nepal's bewildering spectrum of communisms today. A communist can embrace Hindu orthodoxy, or he can espouse armed revolution to liberate socially marginalized communities – or both. A communist can oppose equal citizenship rights for women, or he can claim to support it yet vote against it in the constituent assembly. A communist can play eternal word-games about ideology, but he can fail when pressed to act on an ideal.

Maya finds her own difficult answers to all of the ethical dilemmas in *Māncheko Rañg*. The author leaves it to the reader to decide whether or not she is correct. Giri does so by adopting alternating points-of-view. The ironic distance that this narrative structure creates offers freedom to the reader – the freedom to interpret the story as she wishes. It also implies that the characters are free to interpret each others' choices as right or wrong. Unlike in *The Song of Youth*, the author suggests that the reader need not always agree with, or cheer on, the protagonist. To this end, Giri even allows

the reader to sympathize with Pawan's less revolutionary, but perhaps just as idealistic, answer.

The author leaves the reader mulling over the future of the generation that came of age during the Maoist insurgency and the peace process. It is a miracle that they were left with any youthful idealism at all.

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