

*Review of Song of The Soil. By Chuden Kabimo (Translated from Nepali by Ajit Baral). Gangtok: Rachna Books, 2021. ISBN: 978-81-89602-15-4. 196 pages. INR 399.*

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The Gorkhaland Movement has been an ongoing struggle in the region of Darjeeling Himalaya. The demand to attain separate statehood, under the Indian Nation, from the state of West Bengal, has taken violent forms in the last five decades, particularly in the 1980s, forever changing the intellectual development and cultural landscape of Darjeeling Himalaya. Apart from this, the people of Darjeeling Himalaya, and the Gorkhaland Movement, have been subjected to misrepresentations. Against imagination, like that of Kiran Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), that reduces the movement

to a mere regional conflict, comes Chuden Kabimo's *Faatsung* (2019) and its English translation, *Song of the Soil* (2021), by translator Ajit Baral.

*Song of the Soil* is a story, or rather one of the many untold stories, from Darjeeling Himalaya, that attempts to capture a part of history before it gets forgotten. In the chapter, titled 'Shahid Ram Prasad', we are told Shahid Ram Prasad Tamang's story. His transition from Ram Prasad to a martyr reveals the many faces of the Gorkhaland movement. Like many, Ram Prasad joins the revolution against promises of development: if we have Gorkhaland...Every House will have a swimming pool (Kabino 2021, 147). His actions are governed by the party leaders above him and he blindly follows orders for the greater cause of Gorkhaland. However, Ram Prasad soon realises that the movement was not what he had thought to be (149). The revolution that promised prosperity soon makes Ram Prasad destroy his own village: He first burned down the primary school in his own village....Fires leapt in that village where dreams once blossomed (147-148). The village is swept by famine and Ram Prasad's wife and son long for his return. While Ram Prasad is in the camp participating in the revolution, back at home his son dies of hunger. During clashes between the two factions of the revolution, Ram Prasad is killed and is declared a martyr, while his wife is suggested to have been molested and killed by a faction of the revolutionaries. Through Ram Prasad's

story, Kabimo seeks to ask the readers: who actually was the revolution for?

The two factions are seen struggling for power against each other rather than Gorkhaland. The ones in power, who are seen making treaties and giving commands such as, 'To die for Gorkhaland is a matter of great fortune' (45), do not actually face the repercussions of the revolution. It is the Ram Pradas and Nasims, who had volunteered to fight for their land, who get killed or are left crippled, in the end. Nasim, for instance, spends his life after the revolution, 'breaking rocks at the Relli river' (36). Through characters like Ram Prasad, Norden, Nasim, Surya and so on, Kabimo tells us about hundreds of youths who sacrificed their lives for the cause of Gorkhaland only to see the revolution turning into a ground for political corruption.

Kabimo's fiction documents violence perpetrated from all sides during the agitation. Kabimo showcases the fear of Syarpi (Slang for CRPS, Central Reserve Police Force) that loomed around the region as stories of the violence and exploitation carried out by the Syarpis spread throughout the region. The chapter, titled 'Black Day', seems to fictionalise a real life massacre that took place on 27th July 1986 in Kalimpong, when and where armed forces blindly fired on an unarmed crowd. Throughout the novel violence and death become synonymous to the revolution. The three-year movement for statehood,

the Gorkhaland Movement, in the second half of 1980s led by Subhash Ghising had resulted in 297 deaths with 1164 homes destroyed, and the setting up of DGHC, an administrative setup with limited autonomy under West Bengal. (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018, 13)

In the Chapter titled, 'Dhara 144', an old woman is seen telling Surya; Oh I heard that Dhara 144 has been enforced in the Bazaar...We face water shortage too...I was wondering if we could get a dhara too (Kabimo 2021, 59). The word 'Dhara' in Nepali refers to a section of the Indian Constitution as well as to a water source. When Dhara 144 (Section 144) is imposed in the region during the agitation, the old woman thinks that new water sources were established in town and enquires if she could also access such facilities. Through this small episode Kabimo showcases the underdeveloped state of the region that drives the sentiments of revolution amongst the people of the place. We also see the gap between the urban and the rural in the region. Villages are described to have no paved roads or electricity or hospital. (18) We see a city educated teacher referring to a 'remote' village as 'Kalapani', a place where the British incarcerated freedom fighters during the Indian Independence movement (18). Further more, in the chapter titled, 'A Kidnapping', Kabimo showcases the corruption of government officers in Norden's village: Norden was to go to Class 3 now but he didn't even know how to write his own name. (143) Norden eventually moves

out of the village. Even the narrator seems to move out to the city for education and development.

The anxiety (Middleton 2013, 608-21) of being deemed as foreigners in the Indian Nation state has further motivated the movement. Perhaps, for this reason, a unified identity was adopted for the attainment of a separate state. However, it is interesting to see how Kabimo subverts this identity. In one episode, set during a village wedding, we see conflict between two castes: Our Lepcha brothers, please proceed to the lower field...shehnai party, you too please go there..Chettri group, please come to the upper field (Kabimo 2021, 14). The Lepcha group feeling insulted, leave the venue, vowing never to attend the Chhetri weddings. In another instance, we see Latshering amongst his fellow revolutionaries claiming; The history of this place too is linked with the Lepchas...the Tibetans came and destroyed the written stories of Lepchas (100). This very conflict of who belongs and who does not, creates fractures within the community and, in that, the movement.

Kabimo skillfully uses the theme of memory and the act of remembering to narrate a personal story which, by the end, becomes a very important chronicle of the violence of Chyashi ko Andola (the agitation of '86). The news of the death of the narrator's friend Ripden takes him back to his childhood days. We witness, or rather hear, through the young narrator and his friend,

stories of the revolution. These oral stories passed down reveal a side of the movement that intervenes imaginations created by the likes of Desai. The novel and its well translated English version is one of the first books written on Gorkhaland. With such kind of documentation, through fiction, Kabimo not only intervenes and brings in an insider's perspective but also resists erasure of a very significant part of the history of the region.

### Work Cited:

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