

Back at Sundarjal >18

"As long as I can write, there will be no maddening depression."

BP Koirala, writing his prison diary in English has also been trying to do other writing as a therapy against depression and anxiety. It seems to help, except when he realises that he can't write the history of the Nepali Congress on toilet paper because it blots. And he is using the in-wide margins of old newspapers to write the words to soothe his nerves.

from the expenses on food. Everything here is intriguing, we are left to do the guessing as to what their intentions are. They are not frank. Yesterday the major indicated that the non-supply of writing paper was due to a misunderstanding. Today the captain says that the matter has been referred to above. Obviously the major was not speaking the truth.

I am in a better mood today, after lunch. Immediately after lunch I felt depressed as usual. After lunch hour is too difficult for me to spend. I tried to get some sleep without success, then all of a sudden I felt that I should start writing the history of the Nepali Congress which has not received deserved attention by writers. If I don't do it, who else will? Then I got up and started writing—I wrote about 1,000 words. Since I have very little paper, I have started writing the margins of newspaper that are supposed to be very long strips of over an inch width. History of Nepal Congress is being written on these long strips of paper. I have tried writing in toilet paper a lot of which has been supplied in my bathroom. I have brought the roll to my room and have kept it safely in the cupboard as a very precious material. The toilet paper is very thin and will not be suitable for writing. So a dot pen will help here. As long as I can keep myself engaged in writing there will be no onslaught of maddening depression, and as long as I am psychologically all right improvisations can be thought of to carry the burden of jail life without much tension and worry. The idea that I have to write a history of the NC prompted the thought that I have my biography to write. I intend to write a novel on the Revolution of 1950-51. All these will be of 900 pages—300 each. Then I will write articles and social political discussions, with particular reference to policy with folkloric reference to Nepal. One year's job, if not longer.

11 February, 1977

Sundarjal: Didn't get sleep last night. Had very disturbed sleep till 3:30 am. Thereafter didn't have a wink of sleep. Got up to read, but couldn't. The worst part of lack of sleep is that it promotes anxiety, which starts some kind of a chain reaction. I am anxious that I may develop insomnia. I have seen the misery of people suffering from insomnia. Bunu in 1951, inside prison, the anxiety becomes some kind of a panic. I was in panic the whole night. It was only at 4:30 am when GM came with tea and he told me a story in reference to my anxious state how unhealthy imagination leads one from anxiety to another till he becomes mad for nothing. The story is very telling and it did help me restore my equilibrium to some extent. I wouldn't worry if I could get sleeping pills and some medicines for soothing the tension. But doctors are not available. In the morning I did not do my daily round of

pranayam, etc. But by breakfast time I was almost normal. GM says that I must in any case ask for medicines for sleep or for the soothing of nerves because they will start thinking that the jail has demoralized me. During breakfast time, the captain presented me with a copy of the account for expenses incurred for our food during the month Magh which is coming to a close today. Tomorrow perhaps a new major will take charge. Our total allowance for the month was Rs 812 (NC) out of which they spent Rs 712, the balance Rs 100 was handed to us. We are again intrigued as why they have to give a full account in writing properly signed both by the major and the captain and give us in cash the balance of the allowance not spent. This is not done and was never done. Perhaps the intention is to show us that the allowance is liberal and also to indicate that all our needs other than food, like soap, paste, toilet articles (perhaps cigar or cigarettes too, now perhaps they will permit me to get cigars), zarda, etc. can be met by the money left over

BOOK REVIEW

by MARK TURIN

Lovesick, homesick or simply sick of Tibet

Kesar Lal, Nepal's ever-prolific storyteller and narrator (and now the holder of a distinction from the prestigious Nepal Bhasa Parishad), turns his hand again to translation in this delightful new book. In the same vein as his recent *Newspaper Merchants in Lhasa* ("Banjas along the Barkhor", #34), Lal unearths an intriguing tale written in Newar, and through translation and annotation makes it accessible to a wider audience. Readers who remember the charming *Newspaper Merchants in Lhasa* may recall that an excerpt of Chittadar's *Letter from a Lhasa Merchant* is one of the chapters. Lal delivers the complete translation with *Mimmarpaqau*.

In his Translator's Note, Kesar Lal stresses the numerical and economic prominence of Newar traders in Lhasa. Before the Chinese occupa-

tion of 1959, around 1,000 Newars lived and traded in Lhasa and towns such as Shigatse, Gyantse, Kyiroing and Kuli. Given the circumstances of this book, Lal is careful to point out that the few Newar businessmen based in Tibet were accompanied by their spouses and children, and that many married a Tibetan woman as a second wife. Interestingly, sons born to Newar men with Tibetan wives were accorded Nepal citizenship, while daughters born of such unions were perceived as strictly Tibetan.

Chittadar was born in 1906 into a Kalthamdu-based Tuladhar family with a long tradition of trade in Tibet. As a young man, he managed to not follow his father's footsteps. That he should later choose the life of a Newar trader in Tibet as a literary subject is thus all the more revealing. The asymmetry between author and protagonist is further accentuated when we learn that Chittadar was very faithful and devoted to his wife (page 7), in marked contrast to the character of his novel.

Mimmarpaqau is a biographical autobiography. Chittadar's life as it might have been had he not broken away from Chittadar's inspiration for this work came from an unlikely corner. At a formal stage, he read Stefan

Zweig's well-known *Brief einer Unbekannten* (recently immortalized in a French TV movie) and took this novella as the model for this book. Chittadar went on to have a long and impressive literary career, receiving the title *Kavi Koshir* from the King of Nepal, and publishing over a hundred works before his death in 1982. He called two of his major works his children: the 350-page poem *Sugata Saravasmahar's son*, while the 107-page *Mimmarpaqau*, which he dedicated to his mother-in-law, whom he barely knew, was his "daughter".

The central contrast of *Mimmarpaqau* is a novel-length letter, in that it is meant to be read by one reader only: his spouse's wife. The narrator's account intertwines emotional entreaties to his distant spouse with cultural, historical and social observations on the traditions of both Newars and Tibetans living in Lhasa. Perhaps because of the oscillation between romantic confessional and intimate ethnography, or perhaps because we are all now much more exposed to stories and images from Tibet, the descriptions often come across as a little patchy. While certain sections are riveting to read, others are somewhat bland, and the overall effect is strangely uneven with the reader left hoping for more detailed observations in some places, while wishing for a less-facetted author during the page-long reports of feasts.

Nevertheless, the text has plenty of high points, which make the book as a whole worth the effort. Early on in his epistle, the scribe challenges the power of traditional Nepali letter writing, which dictate that hearts

are not bared and formal terms of address are maintained: "It seems to me that the use of the polite form 'you' for one's husband, possibly the closest person, is necessarily to put him at a distance. I don't quite appreciate it" (page 13).

The physical distance between the letter-writer in Tibet and his wife in Nepal stands in contrast to the familiarity and intimacy of his letter, as if the trader is compensating for physical distance with newly-found emotional intimacy. On more than one occasion, the scribe imagines his spouse's reaction to the content of his letters and urges her not to blush.

Mimmarpaqau is all about change and transformation. While the article takes great pains to articulate his undying devotion to his wife in the first fifteen pages of the letter, by page 25 the reader begins to doubt his sincerity. His description of meeting the locals of Lhasa is particularly revealing: "There were many women among the visitors, some of them quite young. A slight tremor went all over me when they sat close to me." This aside is present, and a small but perceptible change in tone marks the narrative from this point on.

The scribe goes on to note, with impressive candour, that Newars were proverbially entangled in so many social and religious affairs in Nepal related to our afflictions that we never had time to do well in 'other activities' (page 32). His depiction of Newar life in Lhasa would support this judgement, a list of endless rituals, feasts and gatherings. The nugget of traditional Nepali secrecy in these descriptions

is interesting and insightful. The scribe is, for example, impressed with the standard of housekeeping in a typical Lhasa home: "The kitchen was clean, unlike ours in Nepal. The maidwaiter fetched water and saw that there was no accumulation of dust or dirt" (page 32). Likewise, he is envious of the more relaxed social interactions he witnesses in Lhasa: "among the Tibetans, the couples are inseparable, even when they go to trade. As these melancholic thoughts occupied me, a sigh escaped involuntarily" (page 55). As the letter progresses, the scribe's allegiance moves subtly away from Nepal in general, and Newar social life in particular, towards more noticeably Tibetan sensibilities. He writes of the "trill women of Nepal" (page 91) of the Tharadam monks of Kalthamdu who "tune lay people to abandon their home and family" (page 97) and concludes with the self-deprecating, if rhetorical, statement: "I don't have to tell you that we Newars are a very poor people" (page 97).

Without divulging the dramatic conclusions of his letter, in the course of writing, the trader develops from an earnest and lovesick husband into a bitter, confused and uprooted man, deeply suspicious of organised religion. The internal changes which the scribe undergoes are profound, and bear testament to Chittadar's skill as a purveyor of complex characters. On re-reading *Mimmarpaqau* I noted prophetic pointers to the denouement: "After all men are men. Even the common folk seemed to know of the evil that would come from our sorrow" (page 19). In a moment

of self-doubt the scribe proclaims: "But what sort of a person am I? I asked myself. To abandon you and come so far away to earn a paltry sum of money? The profession of the trader is indeed to be condemned!" (page 41)

When read in the context of what is known about the author's life, *Mimmarpaqau* may be seen as a gentle sermon on the dangers and entanglements of the pursuit of business. Perhaps college professors in Nepal should encourage eager students embarking on their studies of Commerce to read this letter of penance.

In his careful translation, Lal brings an important work from the substantial corpus of Newar literature to an international audience. His translation is a fitting illustration of the unexpected spin-offs of globalisation: a Newar writer is inspired by a German novel to write a novel in his mother tongue, which is rendered into English and circulated by another Newar writer, folklorist and translator. The multilingual puzzle is not complete yet, as the eminent French anthropologist of Nepal, Professor Cornelle just, is presently working on a French translation of *Mimmarpaqau: Letter from a Lhasa Merchant to his Wife*.

Mimmarpaqau: Letter from a Lhasa Merchant to his Wife, by Chittadar 'Hidimay', translated by Kesar Lal. 2002. Tinsel Series. Robin Cook, New Delhi. 138 pages, including notes, glossary and calendar. ISBN 88-8758-55-6. Rs 200.

