

The Ordinariness of a Day

Indra Bahadur Rai

Translated by Michael Hutt

Translator's note

Indra Bahadur Rai (1927-2018) was one of the most influential writers of Nepali prose. He is particularly noted for his highly innovative short stories. This story (original title *Euta Dinko Samanyata*) comes from his second collection, *Kathastha*, published in 1972. I first attempted to translate this very challenging text about twenty years ago, but was not satisfied with my efforts. Abhi Subedi very kindly annotated my draft translation with copious notes, which showed how much more work needed to be done before it could see the light of day.

When I was invited by Prem Poddar and Anmole Prasad to contribute to the book they were compiling (*Gorkhas Imagined: Indra Bahadur Rai in Translation* (Kalimpong, 2009)) I retrieved my draft translations of this and several other stories from an old file and worked on them again. Despite Rai's highly individual and often very abstracted style of writing, this time I found that this story opened up to me in a way it had not done before. It is steeped in the loving relationship between a woman and a man, and their equally loving relationship with the environment that surrounds them, and I found its understated evocation of a sense of impending sadness deeply moving. In the event, my translation did not find a place in *Gorkhas Imagined*, but appeared later in a festschrift volume published in honour of Professor Theodore Riccardi.

The Ordinariness of a Day

'You've scattered the radish seeds thinly, Maya', I said. I was scratching mud off a hoe with a shard of dry bamboo. 'Though that rain shower the other day has made them all sprout up very quickly'.

I had bent back some of the grass that grew on the edge of the terrace, so that I could sit on it. I had just finished planting the bean seeds, and she had spread out the empty seed bag and was sitting on that. We were resting. The radish plants had germinated here and there on the two long terraces further down, and each had already become two leaves or three leaves in the freshly-turned soil.

'The rain washed a few of the seeds away, but our chickens don't let them lie either,' said Maya. 'That hen with the ten chicks keeps on coming down here.'

'Yes, she does...'

'If you don't look for a moment she'll scratch up the whole field.'

'How hot it is today, isn't it! It's corn-drying sunshine'.

'Well, I guess we'll recover the price of the seeds.' Maya was talking about the radishes.

'What did I just say to you?' I pretended to be annoyed.

'What did you say? You said it was sunny. You said the corn would dry'. Maya smiled weakly.

‘Let the sun shine like this for a week now,’ I said. ‘Then all our corn will dry, the cucumbers will grow bigger, and the tamarilloes hanging all over the branches will gain some colour.’

‘My two nesting hens will hatch out their eggs, I’ll dig up the potatoes, and the beans you planted today will sprout’ she added.

‘There will only be a month and a half left before Dasain by then. We will have had to buy the children new clothes. I will have been paid, and I’ll have bought Madam a Kanjiviram sari.’

Maya smiled. ‘He’s already planted his seedlings over there’.

On the opposite hill field, Sanbir’s father was relaxing, rolling himself a smoke. He must have finished planting his seedlings already.

‘Everyone should have their own little jungle. Not so that we could cut fodder for our own cow there, or bring firewood for our own house. I mean that the villagers would ask, and we would have to give; that they would steal and we would have to pretend to protest. The way of the world. Snake corn would grow there and our children would be frightened when they saw it; berry bushes would grow, covered with thorns; people would gather from all around’.

‘It’s been sunny like this for two days now’ Maya said.

It really was good and sunny, and the sunshine made it warm all around. If you dropped down one terrace it felt even stuffier. Today the breeze came up the slope, along the ravines and streams. The leaves were shaking on the broom, cardamom and arum. Nearby, the corn stood checking the breeze. Each plant bore two cobs.

‘Our corn grew well this year’ I said. ‘Even the mice and the crows are coming to eat it.’

My eyes travelled further and further down the terraces.

‘The householder’s way is the best of all, grandmother used to tell us. People who become *sadhus* and *sannyasis* have to beg before they can eat, she said, and it’s only the householder who feeds everyone, from people to gods, birds and mice.’

This little piece of religion made me think to myself.

‘Perhaps’, I said, ‘But to uphold that kind of household *dharma* you have to protect it from thieves. You have to throw rocks at the people who try to steal from you.’

‘Sahinla Daju over there watches over his corn all day, poor thing. He even guards it on Sundays,’ Maya told me. ‘If the monkeys got in even for a moment they would destroy the whole lot’. Maya looked over in the direction of Sahinla Newar’s fields. But the wall of our field obscured them.

‘His land is right at the mouth of the valley. A monkey would only come into ours if his had been finished off first.’ I felt secure.

‘Sanbir’s father really has planted his seedlings already. Our children are just reaching the spot’. Maya had seen them.

I too saw glimpses of green and white.

‘He’s come out without putting on a shirt!’

‘The seedlings are planted, but you’ve put in too many magnolias,’ Maya said.

‘There’s a non-flowering type too, its leaves are good for fodder. There’ll be a lot of *tusare*, their stalks should be pruned and moved about now. They’ll survive being moved, won’t they?’

‘What’s the point of moving them? *Tusare* doesn’t give fodder in the winter, all its leaves fall before that. It’s green during the rains, but there’s plenty of grass on the ground then. *Gagun*’s better for fodder.’

‘Yes, *gagun* is good.’

‘It makes the field look nicer too.’

Above us, a *gagun* tree stood listening to our conversation. It was so thick it did not allow you to see the blue of the sky.

‘What is it that is beautiful in this *gagun* tree, do you think?’ I asked, looking at it. ‘The leaves are amazingly thick, that’s what makes it so good, isn’t it? The red line of the stalk goes right up under the leaves: look, it’s on every leaf. That’s what I like about this tree.’

Several moments passed.

‘Hey, look over there.’ I pointed to the Sikkim hills. ‘Denzong is on the other side of that peak. The clouds, look, they’re circling there, how beautiful!’

Maya looked in that direction too, resting her frail body on me.

‘If I wrote that in a story, how would I write it, tell me.’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘The mountain gathering the children of the clouds onto its lap... That wouldn’t do, would it!’

‘No, that wouldn’t do.’ Maya smiled.

‘The cloud (wounded desire) wants to hide itself inside the rock...’

‘A Dali painting?’ she asked, ‘The one you saw the other day?’

I abandoned my efforts.

We looked at other people’s fields in the distance. Terraces cut like waves of water, terraces of soil and grass.

‘How many clumps of bamboo do we have?’ I asked, just out of the blue.

‘Twenty’.

‘There are twenty-eight clumps of *pareng*. Twenty nine, with that one you brought last year, the one with the thin fluttering leaves’.

‘Has that one been moved?’

‘Why shouldn’t it?’

‘I liked that bamboo we saw at the flower gardens, the one with the four stripes, alternating between yellow and green. That’s the one I liked.’

‘The one beside the pond?’

Maya smiled.

‘I’ll get you one like that’.

‘I showed you it two years ago.’ She hid her hope in her heart, and pretended disappointment.

‘But you shouldn’t plant fig trees. As soon as there’s even a slight wind the branches or even the trunk will snap. Only those two on the terrace are any good.’

‘Since yesterday Renuka’s mother is no longer with us.’ I spoke again. ‘When it’s time to take the corpse away the children of the house will weep so bitterly, I am really afraid of how they will cry then.’

I stopped to think about it.

‘Well, children cry,’ said Maya.

‘The children will really cry hard on that day, the husband will sit in silence as if he bears it all. But the little ones will begin to forget the very next day, and each day they will laugh a little bit more. Later they will forget to weep, because life waits for them ahead, carrying a bundle of all their hopes and expectations. But the husband who didn’t weep yesterday remembers his wife that night when someone

else serves him his rice, remembers her as he prepares to sleep, remembers her when he rises in the morning and notices that she isn't there, remembers her as he works outside, remembers her when he comes home and sits down. Until he dies himself he will keep on being startled like this.'

'He just lives on now because life obliges him to', I said.

The sunshine had spread to the far tea garden, sunshine that made all the greens turn golden.

The lines of small tracks and paths descended from a cluster of houses; one faintly-drawn line swept round in a big curve and entered a grove of eight or nine trees—that must be where the village spring is. Another path went steeply up from the village into the jungle above, to fetch firewood. At three places, white monsoon streams come straight down, splitting the tea garden into sections. The white fragments of the streams come tumbling down; the sound of the big river below shakes the feet of the hills. At one place in the forest a waterfall falls from inside a waterfall itself; every year I look for it there in the rains.

'Over there you can even see the water falling if you sit and look.' She pointed to the same place.

The water was stirring, falling slowly, as if it was waiting for a moment of sleep. Happiness came up the hill.

Now I came closer and said, 'Our soya beans in the field are good this year, the corn is better than anyone else's, there are no marigolds, and all our potatoes are good and white'

'You're a big man, I'm a sick woman' said Maya. I looked at her face, which was flushed and perspiring. Now, tired of taking life seriously, she was joking. 'I could call down a fever with this stalk of thotney and a handful of clover. I could come out of the door, get soaked and die in an instant.'

'*Chame's wife Gaunthali was very mouthy. Even if you spoke to her straight she would slant the issue and look for an excuse for a quarrel*', I recited.¹

Maya laughed. My accusation was excessive, and she was unable to counter it, so she laughed. Weakness. I loved her.

A big rag of mist, breaking in places, came straight up as we watched, and hung itself around us.

'Don't sit in the damp too much, let's go' I said.

'But I feel warm' she said.

I got up first, and she pulled herself up on my arm.

'Your *Acidanthera* has flowered over there too.' On a long curve of green on the bank below, a four-petalled white flower hung and swayed. A puff of pungent scent came to us on the breeze.

'I've transplanted some good junipers' I said, looking all round the field. That pear tree over there has got big, it will bear fruit next year. Don't let anyone cut down that big mulberry.'

We had begun to go home, slowly through the terraces. Brushing aside the leaves of the bending broom we went, losing ourselves among the corn plants that were taller than ourselves.

'Wait, I'll bring some corn.' Maya stopped here and began to inspect the corn. She looked at its dried whiskers. I also strode up and broke off two cobs.

¹ These are the opening lines of the famous short story *Paralko Ago* by Guruprasad Mainali (1900-71), first published in about 1937, which recounts a brief but furious row between a farmer and his wife. My translation of this story, entitled 'A Blaze in the Straw', appears in my book *Himalayan Voices: An introduction to modern Nepali literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 189-96.)

A little further up, I said, 'I'll grant you a boon. If you want to keep me happy all of the time, give me pickle made from this.' A *timur* plant grew there, its leaves and body full of red thorns.

'Let it grow.'

'Only to please you...'

'What is there for food today' I asked.

'Cabbage. I'll send Deshpad now, he'll cut one for us.'

'Shan't we eat chicken?'

'Which one?'

'The black and white rooster, the speckled one'

'Kill it.'

Then I turned to her, as she walked ahead carrying corn in her shawl, and said, 'We two are an emperor and an empress. We came to ascertain and experience the condition of our subjects, the common people. We lived in disguise and understood everything after twelve years. Now we can bear it no more. Let's return to our royal palace.'

Maya laughed softly. 'I was going to say something', she said. 'But I won't, let it go.'

When we reached home, Madhu from the house above, Alpana and all the children were in the yard playing hopscotch. I butted in and took my daughter's turn, and hopped along from square to square.

'Mother, is it right?'

I have shut my eyes, it is silent, I am waiting for the one who will answer.