

## Of 'life and the land' : Darjeeling in Indra Bahadur Rai's

### *There's a Carnival Today*

Jemima Sakum Phipon

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, M.U.C Women's College, Burdwan.*

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to closely examine Indra Bahadur Rai's *There's a Carnival Today* as a historical documentation of 'life and the land' of Darjeeling in the 1950s. *There's a Carnival Today* (2018), is a translation of Indra Bahadur Rai's *Aaja Ramita Cha* (1964) by Manjushree Thapa. The fact that it is 'a novel about the old Darjeeling' written by a son of Darjeeling's soil makes it a Darjeeling novel in the truest sense. It chronicles the socio-political upheavals which brought about dynamic changes to the Darjeeling hills post-Independence. Even after India's independence from the colonial masters, Darjeeling witnessed very little or no change in the administrative and economic structures as domination and oppression persisted in Darjeeling in the form of an internal neocolonialism perpetrated by the Government of West Bengal. The novel portrays the unrest in the tea plantations as workers protested against difficult labour conditions and took to the streets in protest. Though written at a time when the Gorkhaland movement had not begun, yet it portends the future unrest. The novel portrays the quotidian lives of the people of a cosmopolitan Darjeeling through the eyes of Indra Bahadur Rai. At the core, *There's a Carnival Today* is a novel that centres around a theme that is prevalent in Indra Bahadur Rai's writings, the Indian Nepalis, and their place in this massive political entity called India. It foreshadows the issues of identity which still shape politics and attitudes in the region even today.

**Key words :** chronicle, socio-political upheaval, post-Independence, neocolonialism.

*There's a Carnival Today* (2017) is a translation of Indra Bahadur Rai's magnum opus, *Aaja Ramita Cha* (1964) by Manjushree Thapa. The novel is a realistic portrayal of the quotidian lives of the people of Darjeeling in the 1950s through the eyes of Indra Bahadur Rai. The very fact that it is based on the first hand 'knowledge and experience' of a *Darjeeling* (native of Darjeeling) of his contemporary times makes it 'a novel about the old Darjeeling' in the truest sense. This paper seeks to closely examine Indra Bahadur Rai's *There's a Carnival Today* as a historical documentation of 'life and the land' of Darjeeling in the 1950s. The novel chronicles the socio-political upheavals which

brought about dynamic changes to the Darjeeling hills after the Indian Independence. Indra Bahadur Rai dexterously brings to light the suffering ,insecurities of the Indian Nepalis in the Darjeeling hills when the region was plagued by underdevelopment, poverty ,unemployment in the post independence period. Even after India's independence from the colonial masters, Darjeeling witnessed very little or no change in the administrative and economic structures as domination and oppression persisted in Darjeeling in the form of an internal neocolonialism perpetrated by the Government of West Bengal. In the post-independence period, the Darjeeling hills came under the influence of significant political movements like the communist labour union movement in the tea estates and the political movement demanding that a separate state for the Indian Nepalis be carved out of the state of West Bengal. Though written at a time when the Gorkhaland movement had not yet begun, yet it adumbrates the future unrest. The novel depicts the agitation in the tea plantations as workers protested against difficult labour conditions and low wages and took to the streets in protest .This great Darjeeling novel captures successfully the multiplicity and synchronicity of the cosmopolitan town of Darjeeling.

The novel successfully captures the cosmopolitan nature of Darjeeling's cultural landscape in its characterization. The characters reflect "the dynamics of cultural loss, hybridity, and ethnogenesis ... that have yielded Darjeeling's distinctive multicultural identity and made the hills a unique site of Himalayan cosmopolitanism." (Shneiderman and Middleton 8). Rai's Darjeeling is peopled by characters belonging to the working class with varied ethnic and religious affiliations ranging from politicians like Janak Yonzon, the protagonist and Bhudev, clerks like MK and Ajay Das a Bengali born and brought up in Darjeeling, Daniel Babu an army officer, rich businessmen like Jayabilas to petty shop owners like Passang La the owner of a liquor shop, Kisanram a Bihari paan wala , Fakruddin Ahmed who sold rotis and had a Nepali wife and Birman a domestic help from Nepal who live together bound by a common lingua franca and their love for Darjeeling. As seen in Janak , though he does not deny his cultural connection with Nepal yet he considers himself to be more of an Indian , an integral part of Darjeeling " We, the Nepalis of Darjeeling, are both trusted by both India and Nepal, and so both India and Nepal try to win our love and affection; but Darjeeling is ours and we are Darjeeling's... Since primaevial times, Darjeeling has belonged to those who can plough its grey and red soil and produce food. It can't be anyone else's ." (170)

By the twentieth century Darjeeling had burgeoned into a political, cultural, literary hub of Nepalis in India. The educated people of Darjeeling were politically aware and conscious . They felt the need of political organisations that would safeguard as well as secure their political rights and interests in India . As a result of which a memorandum demanding a separate administrative set up for the Darjeeling hills was submitted to the British India government as early as 1907. This was followed by the demand for autonomy in the Darjeeling hills by the Hillmen's Association in 1917. The All India Gorkha League was established in 1943 to champion the cause of Nepali speakers all over India. It demanded the separation of the Darjeeling district and Dooars from Bengal. In 1947 the CPI demanded Gorkhasthan , an independent nation comprising of Nepal, Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills. In 1954, the Communist Party of India (C.P.I) also laid down demands for regional autonomy in the Darjeeling hills. The aspirations of the Nepalis for self rule went unheard and unmet. Post Independence, the Nepalis of Darjeeling were confronted by a grave identity crisis. The Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 opened the border between India and Nepal permitting free movement of people across the border. "The situation (is) further complicated for the Indian Nepali whose citizenship and hence loyalty to the nation is always suspected and who finds himself constantly battling what Nath calls the 'myth of a double homeland'." (Chettri 298) This further increased the anxieties of the Indian Nepalis over their constitutional rights as rightful citizens of India and subjected them to racial discrimination and oppression . Since the Independence of India in 1947 Darjeeling has been administered by the state of West Bengal . The Government of West Bengal ushered in very little or no changes in the administrative or economic structure of Darjeeling . The tea estates which were once owned by European planters were owned by Bengalis , Marwaris or by big corporates from other parts of India whereas only in very few cases managerial positions were held by the locals .As

remarked by Subba in his *Ethnicity, State, and Development: A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling*, the State Government is said to have taken very little initiative in rejuvenating the ‘moribund’ tea plantations in Darjeeling as a result of which there was a drastic decrease in the number of tea gardens this adversely affected the production. The tea estates were in a deplorable condition, the plantation workers were staggering under the burden of underdevelopment, low wages and poverty. The pathetic condition of the tea plantations and its workers galvanized the influence of the Communist party.

With the stagnation of agriculture and tea gardens the economic condition of the region deteriorated. Trade and commerce in the region too was completely dominated by outsiders -the Marwaris and Biharis. In spite of their numerical strength the locals found themselves being economically exploited by the outsiders. Sita’s confrontation with Jayabilas echoes this sentiment of the “You come to our place and suck our blood... Who offered loans to your father and grandfather back in the old days, when they didn’t have the wherewithal to open a shop? You are a selfish caste!” (182) There was very little or no scope for locals in the sphere of trade and commerce except for petty ones. As Janak remarks “The best businesses are in the hands of those of other caste and kind. The petrol pumps, the lumber trade, rice and dal, clothes - these all were snatched up a long time ago by others. What’s in our hands, other than vegetables and oranges?” (125). Bengali officials went on to fill most of the posts in the government sector. Darjeeling offered very few opportunities for employment of both educated and uneducated youths. M.K., Janak’s neighbor too falls prey to the problem of unemployment and abject poverty. Even though he was educated and hailed from the family of the renowned Batas Munshee a great leader of the Congress party, his failure in securing a job leads him to depression and eventually compels him to commit suicide. The character, MK throws light on the frustration and dissatisfaction among the unemployed youths of the times. Janak comments on the contemporary problem of unemployment saying “Even after they graduate, can people really find good jobs in Darjeeling anymore?... there were so many jobs in our very own Darjeeling, you couldn’t find people to work for you...” (154) This compelled people to flock to Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, the North east or to cities like Delhi, Bombay in search of jobs. Ignorant fellow Indians from other parts of India considered them to be citizens of Nepal and referred to them as ‘foreigners’. Such instances infused fear and insecurity among the new generation of Nepalis. The reaction against the ill treatment, discrimination, oppression and exploitation faced by the people of Darjeeling found its articulation through a socio-political movement for statehood, which they considered was the only solution to the grievances both political and economical of the people in the Darjeeling hills.

The 1950s saw the evolution of Darjeeling from a wee sleepy town into an urban, commercial hub. The advancement of formal education, establishment of various political and socio-cultural organisations helped forge a modern public culture in Darjeeling. This modernization also ushered in evils like materialism, unhealthy competitiveness, corruption, intolerance towards outsiders, disunity based on political and racial affiliations. Darjeeling witnessed a deterioration in moral values and ethics just as Janak ponders “It seems that society is built on heartlessness and cruelty... it’s a crime for anyone to try and progress” (180) For instance, the cut throat competition in the world of business embitters the relation between Jayabilas and Janak who were once friends and business partners. Jayabilas files a case against Janak when he fails to repay the fifteen thousand rupees he owed him precisely at a time when Janak’s business was failing. Janak’s household too stood divided, he and his son Ravi were disunited on the basis of their political belief. Ajoy comments on bribery and corruption prevalent among politicians and in the government offices saying “People are terrible. They just give you money. I’m so used to it now that I feel bad, I feel hurt, if I don’t get money... People have to offer bribes to get their work done. And as for our Darjeeling politicians - oof!” (28) Instances of Bengali tourists being manhandled, shops of Marwari traders being vandalized, in the novel, draws our attention towards the increasing hostility and intolerance of young ethnic chauvinists towards outsiders.

While in the tea estates located in the fringes of the Darjeeling town a widespread discontent was brewing as a result of the underdevelopment, poverty, illiteracy, economic deprivation and the absence of legal protection for the labourers. In as early as the 1940s the workers of the tea estates came under the sway of the Communist party who were trying their level best to unionize the workers. As a result of which the first union namely the *Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha* was started by the Communist Party of India (CPI) on 15<sup>th</sup> of September 1945. Since then the trade unions affiliated to various political parties have served as mediators between the labourers and the estate owners. They played a significant role in placing the demands of the labourers for increase in wages, better living conditions and various other facilities and benefits before the estate owners and managers. Labour uprisings at tea gardens in Singtam, Tukver, Ambek, Pasitang, Rahani and other places all around Darjeeling often find mention in conversations in the novel. In fact the word 'Carnival' or the 'ramita' in the title of the novel refers to the incident in the novel when protesting tea workers from various tea gardens far and near held a demonstration in the heart of Darjeeling town demanding redressal of their grievances. As men, women and even children raised cries of "End all injustice", "Long live workers' unity", "We need –citizens' rights!" "We need –fundamental rights!" as the citizens of Darjeeling town "peer(d) down in disdain, pity, curiosity and delight" at the chanting demonstrators. For a while the onlookers charged by the frenzy of the moment also felt like part of the carnival. But the peaceful and non-violent rally of the tea workers ends when the police unleash a volley of bullets at the protestors. Manjushree Thapa in her epilogue to the novel reminds us, readers of the fact that the time when Indra Bahadur Rai was writing the novel, Darjeeling was seething under the effect of the unrest in tea plantations and a movement demanding statehood for the Indian Nepalis. She also refers to the fateful incident of 1955 at Margaret's Hope Tea Garden when police fired at a protest by unionized tea plantation workers. I presume it would not be wrong in saying that the episode of the 'carnival' - the protest march by the agitated tea plantation workers in the novel is based on the historical event of 1955.

Indra Bahadur Rai's *There's a Carnival Today* is perhaps the only literary work by a son of the Darjeeling soil that portrays the underbelly of the world famous Darjeeling tea. It engages with the life and society and the zeitgeist of Darjeeling in the post-independence period. Using "three measures of experience and one measure of imagination" Rai concocts a realistic narrative of the socio-political turmoil of the 1950s which greatly influenced the 'life and land' of old Darjeeling. At the core, the novel centers around a theme that is prevalent in Indra Bahadur Rai's writings, the Indian Nepalis, and their place in this massive political entity called India. It foreshadows the issue of identity which still moulds politics and adds momentum to the Gorkhaland movement even till today.

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