

## From Buddhisagar Chapain's *Karnali Blues*

Buddhisagar published this, his first novel, in the summer of 2010, and it has since been warmly received and widely praised. *Karnali Blues* is a lengthy (376 pp.) first-person account of growing up in a Pahari family in the west Tarai. It is written in Nepali but several of its characters speak in Tharu and the Jumli dialect of Nepali. The novel is set in recent times and centres upon the central character's relationship with his father, who lies dying in a hospital bed. Its ten chapters each begin at the father's bedside, then resume a narrative of the author's boyhood, from his early years to his eventual move to Kathmandu after he passes his SLC.

*Karnali Blues* is sophisticated in structure and ethnographically and linguistically rich in content. It contains many entertaining anecdotes and characters, but its overall tone is one of poignancy in its portrayal of a father-son relationship characterised by the son's search for approval, the father's small acts of kindness and forgiveness, the son's fears for his father's dignity as his fortunes fail, and his mother's emotional ups and downs all the while.

The following translation by Michael Hutt is taken from the second chapter of the novel, headed 'Second Day' (*dosro din*), pp. 80-86 in the first edition, published by Fine Print Publishers, Kathmandu.

Purnabahadur Bista!  
Jagat Rawal!  
Basudev Chaulagain!  
Phulba Chaudhari!

Chandre ripped up some dub grass from the playing field, put it into his mouth and pretended to chew. His face was turning blue, as if he had been stung by a scorpion. Although the sun was hanging up in the sky, I felt as if it was squatting on my forehead. Sweat drenched my face as if I had been splashed with water.

Ninety five students were spread out across the playing field, like scraps of the question papers and answer booklets of the previous examination. If anyone spoke I would die. From far away the sound of the mill reached our ears: *tuktuk, tuktuk*.

Results day. At school the Sirs were reading out the results. Our elder sisters' results were being read out in the classroom, the results of classes below Grade 5 on the playing field. Karnabahadur Sir had taken

responsibility for announcing our results. Everyone wanted to hear his name from Sir's mouth. Sir was turning the pages of the Lali Gurans exercise book and calling out the names. I was already semi-unconscious.

Oh Lord, may that exercise book never come to an end.

Sir shouted, 'Aitabahadaur B.K!'

There, even his name has come. Aite jumped up and spun around. He laughed like Shiva in the photo, standing on one leg: hehehe! He was the biggest in our Class Three. Fourteen years old.

Sir was standing on a high bench. When he looked at the exercise book he did so through strong glasses. After he said each name he looked out over them. A white shirt, brown patterned pants, leather shoes—Sir was always smartly dressed. There was always a muffler around his neck. That's why Sir was popular with everyone—he never beat us and he taught the class all three subjects. Lifting his eyes from the book he shouted—

Rambahadur Bogate!

Bogate too jumped up and ran towards the gate. Now ants began to run along the nerves in my brain. I felt as if my head was swelling and getting bigger and bigger, too big to support. I hung my heavy head low.

'We've failed, I reckon' said Chandre in a disconsolate voice. 'Sir's book is nearly finished'.

'We'll come at the end.' I looked at Sir with great hope.

And then, Yuvaraj Gautam!

Yuvaraj wasn't there, so he didn't get up. Chandre's breathing whistled like a river. His lips trembled. He rolled his wet eyes at me and hiccupped.

Sir shut the book, and I thought my breath would stop. All the students jumped up and danced and ran towards Sir, because Sir had pulled the red *abir* out of his pocket. They used to put *abir* on those who had passed. There were ten or twelve of us whose names had not come. I had failed. There now, there goes my blinky watch. I held back the sobs.

Sir was happily putting *abir* on the foreheads of the passes. The fails headed for the gate, hanging their heads. Chandre and I just sat where we were. Our sisters had passed. They would move up to study in Class Six. They came up to us, giggling. They both looked fresh in their sky blue shirts and dark blue skirts.

Parvati Didi bent down a little and asked 'What happened?'

'Fail' I told her in a dead voice.

Suddenly Chandre burst into sobs. His body shook. Mamata Didi put

her hand on his head and said, 'Don't cry, my brother.'

'Ba will beat me.' Chandre wept uncontrollably.

'Don't cry, I won't let him beat you.'

This affection made Chandre tremble even more.

'Study well next year' Parvati Didi said, 'And you'll pass'.

Holding our hands, our sisters got us up and made us walk. Three-Heads was standing near the gate with *abir* all over his forehead. Two boys were beside him. Three-Heads was chewing on a long stick of sugarcane. When he saw us he laughed mockingly, because there was no *abir* on our foreheads. Our sisters went out through the gate giggling and patting one another. We approached Three-Heads. That was the route we had to take. Three-Heads suddenly made as if to strike Chandre over the head with the sugarcane, whack! Chandre ducked to the right to save his head. All three of them laughed like demons on the radio, making the very school shake—hahaha.

'Passes eat sugarcane!' Three-Heads shouted at the top of his voice.

The two boys who were with him laughed, 'And fails?'

'This here...' Three-Heads pointed at his private parts.

Chandre became tearful. He looked at Three-Heads from red eyes. I grabbed his arm and pulled him away, and he came along limping. Even when we were well past him, Three-Heads was still shouting.

Our sisters had gone on ahead without us because they were happy to have passed. Chandre and I were on our own. We didn't speak all the way home. Whenever we saw someone on the road we hid behind a tree. What would we say if they asked us if we'd passed?

We snuck down via the far bank of the Amauri Khola, in case they asked at the teashop too. Dusk had already fallen. The Amauri Khola was deserted. Chandre and I sat on the edge of the river. The breeze was cold—it was touching us inside, getting in through the torn armpits of our shirts and up through the gaps in our shorts. A little way off the yellow light of a lantern spilled out of the teashop. The murmur of people's voices reached us. The Sauji had recently begun to sell sealed bottles of raksi. People said the lights burned in the teashop until midnight!

Chandre was silent. He knew that tonight his father would thrash him. So he was refusing to go home. Even now his lips were trembling a little.

'Your father won't beat you, right?' Chandre looked at me.

I said nothing, I just lowered my head.

'Let's go' I said, catching hold of his hand.

He said nothing but slowly got up. We walked on, brushing off our shorts. Like dark stumps, we were returning home via the bank of the Amauri Khola at the time when the English news comes on the radio. I was the stump in front, walking hurriedly, the other stump was Chandre, limping along.

'Come here' Ba called me as soon as he saw me.

I climbed up with a miserable face.

'You failed, didn't you? You didn't put your mind to it when it was time to study. Everyone passed, you failed.'

The skin on my face tightened.

Ba stroked my hair. 'I thought my son would study and become an important man, but you're on your way to being a cowherd.'

My eyes filled with tears.

'You have saddened my heart, son.'

I sobbed.

'All right, off you go. You'll pass next time.' Ba pushed me gently away. 'I'll bring you a watch next time.'

I went down the stairs wiping my eyes.

'You've made us cry today.' That was all Mother said.

'Study well from now on, you hear?' Sister looked at me, with the *abir* not washed very well from her face. 'I'll teach you'.

I cried all night. From time to time I thought of Chandre. His father must have beaten him badly. If only he had a father like mine—he didn't beat me, but he slapped my heart.

Next day, in the afternoon, Magarmama told us, 'I had diarrhoea in the morning, and when I went outside there was a black shadow going towards the Amauri Khola. I was scared that it might be a ghost.'

I knew that this was Chandre, because he said it was limping.

Chandre disappeared from the village that very morning.

His father searched all over for him. In Lamichane Basti, Tharu Gaon, Paharipur, everywhere. Ba said he even went to Katase and filed a report at the police post.

'Hey, did Chandre say anything to you?' Ba asked me on the third day of Chandre's disappearance, 'Where might he have gone?'

'He used to say he'd go and see his brother', I told him, 'Perhaps he's gone to Bombay.'

'He didn't encourage you to go with him?'

I sat in silence. Ba's face darkened.

'Someone who runs away from home just for failing once is a coward' said father, tossing a two rupee note toward me. 'A son should not run away from home.'

After Chandre ran away Ba was very frightened that I might run away too. Whenever he came back from Katase he would look for me immediately. By luck he would find me studying. After Chandre had gone I didn't go to the Amauri Khola for several days. After many days I met Bhagiram on the bridge near the Amauri Khola one Saturday afternoon. He set his fan down to one side and asked me, rubbing tobacco in his hand, 'Where did that silly boy go?'

'Bombay.'

'How could such a little boy get to Bombay?'

I couldn't forget Chandre for many days. Even in my dreams he seemed to be calling me. After a couple of weeks Ba went to Nepalganj for five days. He came home on the afternoon of the sixth day. Because it was Friday I had come home from school early and I was sleeping. I woke to the sound of his bicycle bell and ran downstairs, wiping the saliva from my cheek. Ba had brought a bunch of grapes, tucked into his waistband. His face was flushed. I went up to him shyly and touched my head to his feet.

'Be lucky' Ba said. 'Is there no one at home?'

'She's gone to the shop to get some sugar.'

'Go and get me some water, I'm parched!'

I hurried off and brought a pitcher of water for him. Ba drank it, making his adam's apple go up and down. Some water spilled down and wet his chest. Setting the pitcher down on the floor, he moved his hand towards his pocket. When it came out, there it was in his hand—a blinky watch.

'Come here.' Ba took hold of my left wrist. In a second he attached the watch to my wrist. Ba asked, 'What time is it then?'

'Thirty five minutes and seventeen seconds past three' I said shyly.

'Go and study.'

I ran off to the attic like a whirlwind.

At meal time that evening Ba told us that on his way back he was on the same bus as Lamichane Kancha. He told Ba that he had seen Chandre

in a teashop in Nepalganj. He was washing tea glasses there. When he saw him he ran away limping.

‘I don’t know where he came from’, the potbellied Sahuji shouted, ‘I gave him work but the little sod ran away again.’

I couldn’t sleep for a long time, thinking of Chandre. From time to time I pressed the button on the rim of the watch, and the watch lit up. When I was looking at the watch at 12:45:17 Ba woke up.

‘How many more times are you going to look at your watch? Go to sleep now!’ said Ba, yawning. Then he went back to sleep. I could hear the faint sound of his breathing.

Here in Matera there is no one as loving as my Ba.