



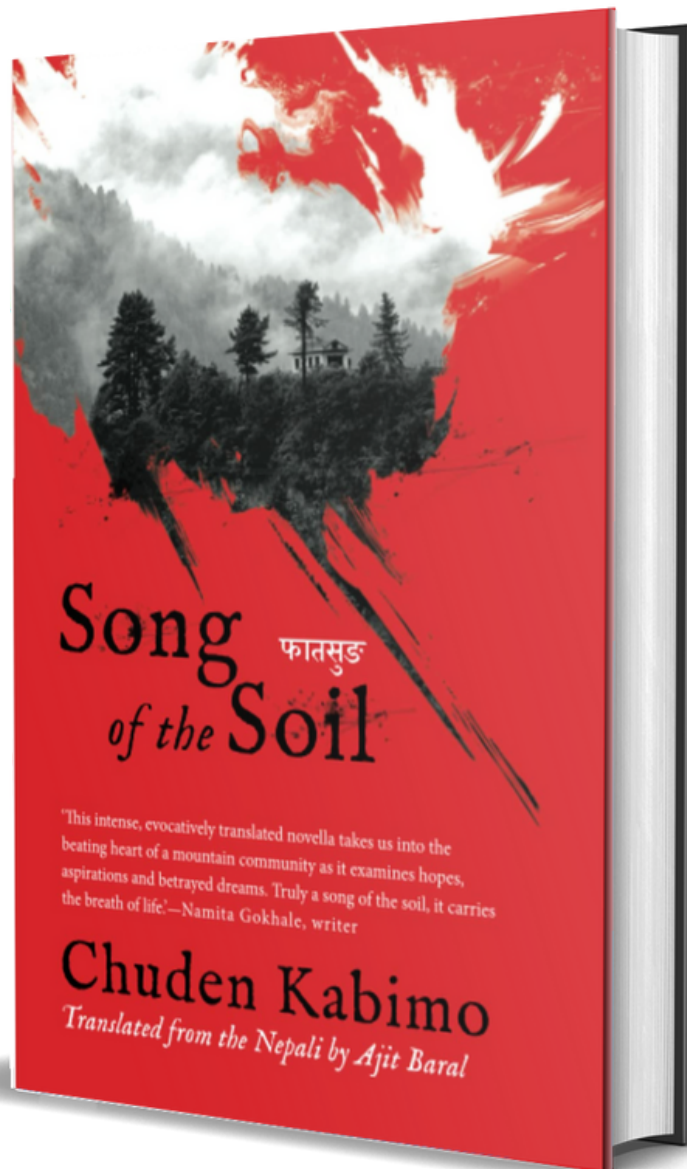
Song Of The Soil

by

Chuden Kabimo

Translated by Ajit Baral

An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature



CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY
INDIAN WRITERS

EARTHQUAKE

'They're saying Ripden is dead!
That same sun whose fire singes the soles of your feet

all day looks beautiful when it is about to set.
For me, Ripden was that same sole-burning sun who set in the darkness created by the
earthquake, throwing a

part of my world into shadow.

It was a late Sunday afternoon.
The setting sun had reached a point beyond the

Macfarlane Church. A cold wind was rushing past my ears. Kalimpong market wasn't crowded;
perhaps because of the sudden chill. The girls who could be seen walking about in shorts and
vests in the afternoon were returning home with their hands deep in their pockets. Taxi-drivers
standing with their arms crossed near the Motor Stand were yawning.

I reached the crossroads at Damber Chowk from Ongden Road. The Industrial Park behind the
Chowk was shut. Only a group of labourers was standing at the Chowk, busy splitting their day's
wages.

I did not feel like going home immediately and loitered there. The glow of happiness was shining
on the faces of the labourers. I basked in that glow for a moment.

Just then a commotion erupted in the bazaar. The labourers ran off screaming in different directions. The taxi-drivers fled too, yelling. It was then that I realized— the world was shaking.

I stood still for a long time.

The entire district of Darjeeling had just experienced a major earthquake.

The next day, I woke up late. I picked up the newspaper pushed underneath my door and read it; the hills were in a shambles.

The landslides hadn't abated. Roads were broken in places. Tremors were still being felt and the telephone network was down.

It was eighteen hours after the earth first shook that the mobile phone in my pocket buzzed. The call was from a new number. I received it.

'Three dead bodies were found but not that of Ripden's. The landslide has swept away half the village,' a voice cried softly on the phone. 'You will have to come here and get the news of Ripden's death published in the newspaper. If not, the government won't accept that he is dead. You will come, won't you?'

The connection broke. So did my heart. And I went to the village.

Ripden had indeed died.

A heap of stones, not heaven, lay where Ripden's paradise-like house once stood. In place of that patch of earth on which he first walked there was nothing but the sweeping landslide of terror. In place of that stretch of sand on which he had etched his first letters there was nothing but the sweeping mudslide of pain bearing everything away. The mudslide which followed the earthquake had swept away Ripden's house. It had swept away his dreams.

It had swept away his God.
How could Ripden be alive when everything else had

been swept away? That was why the villagers had declared, 'Ripden is certainly dead.'

Two hours after making this declaration the villagers had understood a new thing: 'No corpse, no compensation.'

Now that was a big problem.

The sky was still overcast. The rain would stop for a moment and then continue to pour. Mudslides were tugging at the margins of the terraced fields, pulling them down. Fields were tearing apart and washing away; holes grew in them like winnowing sieves.

The golden mustard fields had turned into sodden biscuits. Those fields looked just like Marie biscuits do when soaked in tea.

The mudslides had razed everything to the ground. The village was torn like a page out of an old book.

Pray how was one to find Ripden's body in all of this?

The army did not find Ripden's body even on the third day. So in the eyes of the government, Ripden hadn't died. Even though in the eyes of the villagers, he had.

The villagers had no option other than to follow the ancient practice. They searched for a piece of Ripden's old garment and set the final flame of the dagbatti on it.

Everything had turned into ashes when I reached the village. I didn't find even a whiff of smoke from the cloth that had been put to flame.

'Please get the news of Ripden's death written in a newspaper.' The villagers laid out their final hopeful request before me. 'The government isn't illiterate like us, is it? Something or the other will be done, no?'

What was I to say?

Silently, I read their faces. And I remembered Ripden for one last time. I too remembered his faded shorts. His nail-less toe. His wrist lined with crusts of dirt. The hair which reached down to his ears. His plump cheeks. And the joyous days.

ALPHABETS IN STONE

The river which flows throughout the year does so perennially and quietly. It is only the bourn which dries up in winter that shows off its power come monsoon.

The Ghis river which swaggers in the monsoon was suffering in the throes of drought. Emerging reluctantly from a crevice in a hillside, it was flowing down to the plains as if it did not want to do so.

Perched on the hill above this river was the village of Malbung, where morning began with the sun rising from Mangzing on the hill opposite, and where twilight ended when the sun approached Barbot on the hill behind Malbung and then set. Where the winds from Budhabare blew in winter and the rains from the plains poured in summer. This village would become inaccessible as soon as the monsoon month of Asār began, and turn parched with the arrival of Chaitra.

Opposite Malbung was the craggy village of Pokhrebung, which had been swept down low by a landslide. A bourn flowed right across this landslide which, in monsoon, would become maddened like old man Budathoki's daughter and sweep away anything that came in its way. Come winter, it would turn into a heap of stones and sand.

To the left of Pokhrebung stood Pubung, on whose shoulder flowed the Rankan in summer. Now only the remains of a landslide gleamed there.

I was watching that same mudslide with friends, sitting near Ripden's house. Ripden was doing something under the chicken coop. Suddenly, he stuck his head out and said, 'Oi! Man is made out of ash and chicken shit. If you think I am lying, rub your hands and smell it.'

I did as he asked. Others did too. My hands did really stink like chicken shit.

I rubbed them again. They stank even more.

But is man really made out of ash and chicken shit? I didn't believe it. Ripden understood that I did not believe him. Maybe that was why he added irritably, 'It's true. It is written in the Bible.'

He acted like he was trying to recollect something and said, 'Do you want to hear the story?'

We all nodded. He began: 'God first created the sky. After that the earth. And then everything on earth. After creating everything, He felt: I need someone in my image to witness all this. So on the sixth day, He made a human out of ash and chicken shit. That human was a boy. God put breath into that boy. Even after the boy was created, He felt that something was still missing on earth. It had everything, yet it lacked something. The flowers were blossoming, yet the beauty of the earth felt incomplete. And then God made the boy fall into a deep slumber, took a rib out of his chest and made a girl out of that rib. It is only then that the Earth became beautiful. And that is why men have one rib lesser than women. Understood?'

When he had told us about the very creation of the world, how could we not believe him?

I thought to myself, 'Indeed, humans *are* made out of ash and chicken shit. What all Ripden knows! He really is our guru.'

It was true, Ripden would always make new discoveries and tell us about them. He would tell us things we could never have thought of and make us gape at him in wonder.

He was the one who taught me to run off on my way to school. He was the one who made me an independent thinker. He was the one who taught me to live instead of staying buried among textbooks.

I had been enrolled in the Child Education Centre of the Rastriya Swayamsewak Sangh when I was seven years old. I was just learning to say 'Pranam Guruji' when Ripden taught me an important life lesson: 'Of what use is reading and writing? If you can plough a field, you can eat a meal.'

What better pretext for me to not study! Aama would walk us thirty minutes to reach the school and we would run away without staying there for even fifteen minutes.

A Miss and a Sir used to teach us. Sir was thin, so thin it seemed as if a strong wind would blow him away. His trousers hung loose from his frame. They would always be askew to the left, perhaps because he wore his belt too tight. An old pair of Galaxy slippers was the only footwear he could ever be seen wearing, and they too had worn thin.

Miss, on the other hand, was heavily built and would usually be clad in a kurta-suruwal. She would wear her hair loose. And come to school with Fair and Lovely cream applied thickly on her face to conceal the pigmentation. We could smell the cream from afar.

Our school was more cowshed than school. It had doors on all sides. The bamboo-slat fence that surrounded the school compound had fallen apart and was scattered all over. Which is why we could slink away from whichever direction Ripden signalled us. On the first day, we ran away through the left door. On the second day, from the right. And on the third day, from the front. Sir didn't even notice us!

On the fourth day, we had just reached the door when I saw Miss, with her powdered face, standing there. Her face had become red, her eyes were bulging.

'Oi truants!' Miss shouted, beside herself with rage. She complained to my mother who had walked me to school as usual, 'Ripden has spoilt your son, he's always running away. Yesterday, they skipped school to steal cucumbers. They ate them even before the first pickings had been offered at the church. We have received a complaint!'

Mother spanked me twice with a bamboo slat right there. My voice quivered. I pissed my pants. My eyes became moist and pitiable.

I remembered Ripden chanting, 'Bitter bitter go go, sweet sweet come come,' as he cut the pilfered cucumber.

Miss announced a new punishment: 'You both will do fifty squats.'

Lo, had the 'sweet sweet' not come?

Ripden turned red. For a second, it seemed like he wouldn't oblige. But there was no alternative.

I held on to his ears and he to mine. Thus we began our squats. By the tenth repetition I began to pant. My legs trembled. We had just reached the count of twenty when my legs gave up and I fell down. Tears blinded my eyes.

'That's enough,' I heard Miss say just as I began to see stars. 'Never run away from school! Never steal cucumbers! Or else you will have to crawl on your knees.'

Ripden stared vacantly for a moment. Then he came up to me and whispered, smirking, 'I'll run away from school only if I come here, won't I? You also don't come. Did the elephant become so big because it studied in school?'

On our way back from school, he made me swear on knowledge itself: 'From tomorrow, we may lose our lives but we will not attend school.'

It was the day after we made that promise that Ripden started to take the goats out to graze. He would go to the jungle carrying my grandfather's bag.

For three days, I was taken to school by force. But no, I didn't feel like staying. So I would run away as soon as I could.

How could I study when my guru Ripden wasn't with me?

On the fourth day, Baje, my grandfather, finally declared, 'Let him attend school later. He is still too small. And he doesn't have his friend there.'

Only then was I relieved!

It must have been a few months later that Ripden delivered a religious sermon, 'Rub your forehead one hundred and eight times. The image of Lord Buddha will be formed on it.'

I didn't know how to count. If Ripden knew how, he might have counted for me, like Miss did when we were doing the squats. But he didn't. So I couldn't rub my forehead for exactly one hundred and eight times. That was why the image of Lord Buddha didn't appear on my forehead. Rather, a bruise did.

My friends—Sonam Tamang, Ongden Lepcha, Taarnam Bhujel, Gairi Bhai, Tularam Sharma, Juniram Chhetri, Hari Prasad Bishwokarma—were still busy rubbing their hands. Sniffing their hands, they said, 'Yes indeed. It smells exactly like chicken shit.'

I gloated. Guru Ripden standing nearby was laughing.

'Oi, have a bath,' Baje, who was sitting in the courtyard weaving a doko basket out of strips of bamboo bark issued a decree. 'We have to attend a wedding tomorrow.'

It was the winter month of Baisakh. The only things that were being cooked at home were either millet porridge or tasteless bulgur. We hadn't seen white rice for a long time. It was then that the chance of eating at a wedding reception had presented itself. All of our faces brightened.

Hari Prasad came up with an idea. 'Let's go down to the Ghis river. We will wash ourselves thoroughly. If you rub with a dalsing stone, the dirt will come off easily. That stone is white, that's why.'

'Go, go,' Baje said, smiling.

We left for the river. When we were about to reach Kimbugairi, Ripden said, 'Boys, we should eat three times tomorrow. Mula! It is a marriage in a Chhetri household. They serve only two pieces of meat each. If we eat thrice, we will get six pieces each.'

'Why do you say that?' Juniram asked, getting upset.

But the rest of us agreed loudly with Ripden. 'Yes, we will eat thrice!'

The next day, the sound of the panché baja, the five auspicious musical instruments, resonated in the air.

We watched the marriage procession standing on the edge of a field terrace. It was climbing up the hill from Pairetaar.

Two old men were walking in front, carrying something which looked like the branches of a cherry tree. Following them were people carrying thekis, carved out of wood. Behind them walked the shehnai players. Uff! How could they dance on such a narrow trail! And these people were dancing shamelessly even in a village full of strangers. Some were singing too. Juniram informed us, 'They're not singing songs but reciting shlokas.'

A few young women were walking behind the rest. In their midst was a tall boy—the groom. He had a red tika on his forehead and a bright smile on his lips. The radiance of happiness gleamed in his eyes and a striking turban perched on his head. Another thin boy tagged along with the groom, carrying an umbrella. Wherever he went, the boy would hurry after. It was as if the groom was his king for the day. The shade of the umbrella must always reach the groom. The heat of the sun should not singe the king even a little, you know!

We walked behind the procession. Ripden, who was up in front, would occasionally turn back and wink at us. Juniram found a reason to gloat and whispered in my ear, 'Now you see how grand a Chhetri marriage is! A Lepcha marriage is zero compared to it, zero! They're saying the bride is beautiful too. My mother said that no one in the village is as beautiful as her. Didn't you see the postcard of Samjhana film the other day? They're saying she is as beautiful as Tripti Nadakar, the heroine of that film!'

'Mula, is it enough to just have music?' Ripden exclaimed. 'Think of the food and drink they treat you to at Lepcha weddings. Only at Lepcha weddings can the Chhetris and the Bahuns get very drunk!'

Juniram ran off in a huff. Ripden followed.

The boy who was carrying an umbrella over the groom's head was having a hard time. The path was narrow. At times the way wound uphill. And to top it all, the groom was tall.

All the people in the procession were sweating profusely.

They finally reached the bride's home after an hour and a half. After that, we didn't care where the marriage party went. We busied ourselves drinking tea and eating selroti.

It was some time after we had reached the bride's home that our family members arrived. 'You all better behave!' Baje decreed.

Ripden gestured to us. We made our escape.

Straw had been spread out on the terraced field immediately below the marriage house. Small shops had been set up where paan and savouries such as dalmut, fried gram and peas were available. How I used to enjoy eating dalmut! But I didn't have any money to buy it with. Ripden came up with an idea: 'Drunkards sometimes drop their money here and there. We just have to walk around looking for it.'

Our eyes began to scan the ground.

We searched for money for half an hour but could we find even a paisa?

Music was booming at full volume from the marriage house. Cooks were busy preparing food at one end of the millet field. At its upper corner, the women stitching plates out of leaves were teasing each other.

A bunch of boys were standing on one edge of the field. Ripden said, signalling to us, 'Let's go there. It looks like they are distributing food.'

It must have been nearly 1 o'clock. The sun was right on top of our heads. We ran towards where Ripden had signalled. When we reached we found that they had started serving the food to the children early. They said they were doing so to thin out the crowd. We forgot the money. We forgot the fried gram, the peas and the dalmut.

'Aren't you boys from the Lepcha village? Your food has been prepared down there. Go!' Mantare Kaka sounded an order. He had recognized us. We were relieved. We jumped down to the lower field, took our leaf plates and stood in a queue.

How could we be content with just a single helping? Half an hour later, we were standing on the straw, holding another leaf plate.

An hour elapsed just like that. The sun had cast its shadow on the hill opposite. It seemed as if the weather was about to turn cool.

'How about eating with the elders next?' Ripden was suggesting this to us when the music was suddenly stopped to invite the elders to eat.

The announcer said without preamble, 'Our Lepcha brothers, please proceed to the lower field. The shehnai party, you too please go there. The Chhetri group, please come to the upper field.'

Did we need anything after that insult! Baje, trembling with rage, asked, 'Why should we go to the lower field? You did the same thing to us last time, saying we are beef eaters. We will boycott the weddings of Chhetris and Bahuns from now on. Let's go back.'

Baje was the president of the Kyong Sejum, the Lepcha association. Everyone agreed with him. The Lepchas decided to leave without eating.

Attempts were made to settle the matter but nothing worked, the Lepchas were adamant.

Baje thundered, 'Oi sahamsong. Aba di. Li nong gatsi.' (Oi, you gluttons! Come here. We are going back.)

We followed Baje without making any fuss. Baje made another declaration, 'They insult us because we are illiterates. They think we are beef-eating illiterates. You shall all go to school from tomorrow. You shall all study!'

I nodded. Ripden turned around and brought his mouth near my ear, 'See, you got to eat twice because of me. Otherwise, we would all have returned hungry!'

I turned red just thinking of it.

I looked around. Juniram was following me.

'Only the Lepchas are going back home,' I asked him,

scratching my head. 'Why did you come, Juniram?' 'Friendship above caste,' Juniram declared, smiling broadly. He then ran off, baring his never-brushed, yellow

teeth.

It was a week after the declaration of the boycott that we were taken to school again.

The school was in Biga. I had to walk for an hour and a half to get there. The school building was made out of wood but there wasn't any hole to slink through.

There was a new teacher. His hair was curly, like that of the Italian footballer Roberto Baggio. His eyes were not like that of the Miss of the previous school. His body was not as thin as that of the Sir in the previous school. But his voice was soft. He looked at me and smiled. Then he drew a figure with a long tail on the bench and said, 'Go, get pebbles for me and put them over this figure.'

I went out. Ripden was already picking up stones. Seeing me, he said, 'Let's run away.'

'What did you say?' A loud voice boomed out from behind us. I turned. Sir was standing there looking at me. I almost lost my senses. Ripden ran back into the class.

I feigned innocence and picked up a handful of pebbles. I then went inside the class and put them over the outline of the figure. When all the pebbles in my hand had run out, the figure was complete. Pointing at that, Sir said, 'This is the first letter of the alphabet: "ka", understood?'

It was only some days later that I realized I had been enrolled in primary school at the start of the monsoon season. That too in the nursery, 'pebble', class.

I then went up to 'A' and dropped down to 'B'. Yet I managed to get to Class 1 in the first year.

But that promotion was due to my height rather than my intelligence.