The Clever Ancestor

Until recently, history spoke only of kings and their wars instead of recording the stories of everyone, rich and poor, strong and weak, man and woman. In older histories, when two kings fought, the soldiers and villagers were forgotten. But it was the villagers and soldiers who fought and lost their lives.

More than two hundred years ago, an army from Gorkha, in central Nepal, attacked villages in Garhwal, which is many days’ walk from Kailas, due south of the Himalayas. There, farmers and traders of a peaceful village called Sirdang were worried about being attacked. The Gorkhas had a bad reputation: they would loot the grains and cattle and burn down villages. Some soldiers even believed that dying in battle was a good idea. They would kill unnecessarily just to remind themselves that they were not afraid to die.

Among the Rung people of Sirdang was a wise old man with many children and grandchildren whom he loved. He wanted to protect his family so that they would remember his good deeds and praise him as their ancestor. If enough of his progeny praised him, he might even become a god someday!

Through his wisdom, he realized that the Gorkhas would attack Sirdang for the abundant grains, fine wool, fat cattle and coins gathered through trade in Tibet.
Folk Gods
‘We must flee to the hilltop fort to survive,’ the old man told the villagers. ‘The Gorkhas will come, and their greed is as vast as their cruelty is deep.’ The villagers collected their wealth and families, and fled to a fort at the top of a nearby hill.

A bearded Gorkha commander, carrying a curved sword and a round rhinoceros-skin shield, marched into Sirdang with his cruel soldiers. The village was empty. Although the houses were pretty and clean, there was no grain, gold or cattle in them. The commander saw the fort on top of the hill and took his men there.

A group of unarmed men from Sirdang waited outside the fort with cool, sweet water from a nearby spring. ‘You must be tired after climbing up,’ they said with kind smiles on their faces, and offered water to the commander and his soldiers. The wise old man drank the water first to show the Gorkhas that they didn’t need to fear being poisoned.

‘Why have you come here, commander?’ the old man asked. ‘Your home is a month’s walk away, perhaps more. Your wife must be worried!’

The commander looked at the old man with suspicion. ‘I am the emissary of the king of Gorkha. I expand his empire, and am here to loot and pillage your village.’

‘And kill,’ a soldier growled, but became quiet when the commander glared at him. This soldier wasn’t very intelligent or brave.

‘There is no need for war!’ the old man said. ‘Come inside. Rest for a while. We are a peace-loving people. We’ll gladly give you what you need if we can avoid bloodshed. The gods of our village dislike violence.’

The commander grinned. He had burned many villages and killed many men, women and children to build a reputation for cruelty. Finally, somebody was afraid of him. He twirled his moustache and entered the fort.
A long line of mats and yak-hair blankets had been laid out. Freshly cooked meat glistening with fat waited in copper bowls. Large pots of millet beer sat in a corner. Smiling young men stood ready to serve meat and beer.

Before the commander could say anything, his soldiers sat down and quickly took a sip of beer or bit into a nice piece of roasted goat liver. They smacked their lips and salivated.

‘Alright, alright!’ the commander said. ‘Don’t drink too much, because we still have to loot and plunder.’

The greedy Gorkhas started gobbling down the food. The fat from the meat stained their moustaches and beer dribbled down their beards. Soon, they became drunk.

From a secret door in the back of the fort, the Rung people of Sirdang were quietly escaping one by one. The elderly and the children went first, followed by young men and women. When the wives started leaving, their heavy necklaces of silver and gold coins jangled and alerted the Gorkha commander. He leapt up from his seat and rushed to the door.

‘Where is everyone going?’ he shouted.

The wise old man said politely, ‘Your appetite is large, and your men are still thirsty. My people must show hospitality to their guests. Please go back and enjoy the meat and beer!’

The commander realized that the wise old man was fooling him. He pretended to go back and sit with his men. He picked up his bowl of beer and whispered into it just loud enough for his trusted assistant to hear, ‘Pretend to go outside for a walk and see where everybody is fleeing.’

His assistant pretended he was going for a walk and went towards the gate. Now, the wise old man realized that the commander suspected that he was trying to fool the Gorkhas. He sneaked to the outside of the door and hid in the dark.
And, as alert as the assistant may have wanted to be, the beer in his belly made him sway a little and think a bit slower. Once he was out of sight of the Gorkhas, the wise old man grabbed the assistant with one hand on his neck and another by his waist and flung him into the air, spinning away and over a cliff into the darkness.

Inside, the commander waited for his assistant to return. He ate another bowl of meat and drank another bowl of beer, and finally whispered to another assistant to go outside and check.

The old man grabbed the second assistant by the neck and waist and spun him away over a cliff, sending him flying into the dark. A Gorkha soldier came out every five or ten minutes. The old man grabbed each one and sent him flying into the dark.

Finally, just around midnight, the Gorkha commander looked around the room and saw that his best soldiers had disappeared. There were more Rung men around than Gorkhas. The remaining soldiers were feeble and cowardly, just like the commander. When he realized how the peace-loving and hospitable villagers of Sirdang had cunningly defeated him, the Gorkha commander ran towards the door and jumped with so much force that he sailed right into the dark sky. The old man didn’t have to throw him over the cliff at all.

There, in the darkness of the valley below Sirdang, the Gorkha soldiers were still spinning and flying in the air. All through the night, they bumped into each other in midair. Slowly, by sunrise, they fell to the valley as a single clump of limbs, beards, teeth, swords and bellies. They untangled themselves and counted each other to make sure everybody was present. They looked up the hill at the beautiful village of Sirdang and shivered with fright.
‘The beer was good,’ the first assistant said in a quiet voice. He had been spinning in the air for the longest, so his beard and hair now pointed straight towards his home in Gorkha, far to the east of Sirdang.

‘The meat was good, too,’ said the Gorkha commander sadly, as if he had lost a dear friend. Then, heads hanging in shame, they walked away from Sirdang.

The villagers in Sirdang served the wise old man with delicious food, put a fresh white turban on his head and praised him. He had been wise to avoid bloodshed, honorable in doing his duty of hospitality towards outsiders, and brave in spinning and throwing away the Gorkhas. He is praised even today by his progeny. If more people praise his wisdom, cunning, and honor, who knows, he may even become a god!