ANTHROPOLOGY AND HUMANISM

Fifty-Three Kilos[1]

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SUMMARY *In this fictional story, an anthropologist helps her friend Srijana pack suitcases in preparation for an upcoming trip from Kathmandu to Portland. Srijana's choices about what to take and what to leave behind illustrate the ways in which interpersonal connections are encoded in material objects and illuminate the complex web of relationships between family members in Nepal and North America.* [migration, diaspora, family, Nepal, relationships]

The pressure cooker caught my eye first, gleaming among the profusion of objects covering the living room floor. I suppressed my initial reaction—"You've got to be kidding me"—and instead asked, "Well, where shall we start?" in what I hoped was a bright and encouraging tone.

I had come to help Srijana pack for her four-month trip to Oregon. She had never been to the United States before nor spent such a long period of time away from her home on the outskirts of Kathmandu, and she had spent months preparing for this major undertaking. When I'd spoken to her on the phone a few days earlier, she'd sounded overwhelmed by the dozens of last-minute details to be managed. Hearing the note of rising anxiety in her voice, I offered to come and help her pack her suitcases, and she agreed gratefully: "You've gone back and forth so much, so you really know how to pack."

"Would you like some tea?" Srijana asked me as I cleared a small space for myself on the floor beside one of the suitcases. She sent her son Subin to tell the maid to make three cups of tea: one for me, one for Srijana, and one for Bhauju, the wife of Srijana's brother Prawin-dai. Bhauju was sitting on the couch knitting a sweater, her needles moving in an unvarying rhythm. Srijana would take the finished sweater in her suitcase to Oregon on Friday, then send it on to Bhauju's daughter Pratima in Toronto.

After we finished our tea, the packing began. The weight had to be kept within a strict limit: twenty-three kilos for each of the two checked bags, and seven kilos for the carry-on. Fifty-three kilos in total, slightly more than Srijana's own body-weight. If the bags exceeded the limit, she would be stuck paying at least $50 at the airport, with increasing fees for every kilo of excess. I was also privately concerned that she might not be physically able to handle the heavy luggage on her own and that she might not fully realize that in America, you can't depend on other people to help you carry your things.

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"Do you need all of these?" I asked, holding up a bag full of rhinestone-studded hair clips. "Couldn't you just take a few?"

"Those are for Bidushi. They're from her best friend from school."

"What about these leggings? You have two pairs of them, exactly the same."

"Well, one pair is for me, but the other one is for Lajina. I'll mail them to her in Chicago."

It quickly became apparent that at least one whole suitcase would have to be dedicated to gifts. Commercial mailing services like Fedex and DHL were expensive and unreliable in Kathmandu, and the government postal service was even worse. Instead, the Nepali people I knew depended on their personal networks to send and receive items from others living *bahira*, outside. If you needed to send something, someone was always coming or going, for work or study or a wedding or a relative's new baby. Who could refuse a request to carry just "one small thing"? You never knew when you might need to ask the same favor in return.

"This is for Pramod, from Bua," Srijana said, handing me a red-and-blue men's polyester track jacket. Pramod was Srijana's favorite nephew, Bhauju and Prawin-dai's son. He had been living in California for the past six years, earning first a bachelor's and then a master's degree in mechanical engineering. To my eyes, the jacket looked ugly and cheap. I imagined the stylish young man putting it on for just a moment to take a picture to send back to the grandfather who'd picked out the jacket, and then taking it off quickly, never to wear it again in image-conscious Los Angeles. I rolled it up tightly and stuffed it in.

The pressure cooker was also destined for Pramod. "I'm not sure he'll need it, actually," I hinted. "I used to live in southern California, and I never used a pressure cooker. The elevation is very low, so everything cooks fast. But if he does need one, they're available for sale. It would be very easy to get one." I really wanted to leave out the hulking, impractical thing.

(At that point in my fieldwork, I had not yet learned that Nepali people regularly carried pressure cookers, rice cookers, and other kitchen utensils to family members across international lines. One of the strongest expressions of care within families is the cooking and feeding of daal-bhaat, the daily meal of lentils and rice. When you can't prepare daal-bhaat directly, you send the tools with which to prepare it. What could possibly be more deserving of space in a suitcase than that?)

"Bhauju is sending it to Pramod because he's moving into the new apartment," Srijana replied.

"Oh, right, with Lori. How are they doing?" I asked. Srijana didn't respond, and I realized I'd blundered. Bhauju kept knitting impassively, tight-lipped.

I wasn't supposed to know about Lori. As I'd heard it from Srijana, Pramod was having trouble getting his visa renewed and was worried that he might have to leave the United States after completing his master's degree if he didn't find a job right away. In order to stay in the country, he had decided to marry an American citizen named Lori, whom he'd known for several years. Srijana described the arrangement as purely a matter of convenience, one friend doing another a good turn. They'd probably divorce after some time, once

Pramod's situation was more secure. I had my doubts about whether the relationship was really as platonic as Srijana painted it, as she clearly wanted it to be.

Bhauju was deeply disappointed about the marriage. She'd had high hopes for Pramod, her only son, to return to Kathmandu someday and settle down with a nice Brahman girl from a good family, with fair skin and long dark hair. Like Srijana, Bhauju was committed to the idea that the marriage to Lori was only temporary. It was discussed very little within the family and even less outside of it. I was the only person outside of the family to whom Srijana had spoken about Pramod's wedding, which she would attend during her visit to the United States. "I'm not talking to anyone about it, but you can't tell anybody else anyway," she teased. Over the years of our deepening friendship, I'd assured her many times that, as an anthropologist, I maintain the privacy of things told to me in confidence.

As I continued to help Srijana pack, we came across more items that were clearly intended for Pramod's upcoming marriage: a round tray with little nesting containers for holding spices, a red sari, a green-beaded tilari. I smiled inwardly. Did Bhauju really think that Lori would wear a sari and a tilari to her Los Angeles courthouse wedding? Did she envision Lori cooking daal-bhaat every day, like a good Brahman wife? I had seen a Facebook picture of Lori and Pramod together. The California girl sporting a tank-top and a tattoo, with one arm around Pramod's waist, was in no way an ideal daughter-in-law. Still, I respected Bhauju's attempt, however grudgingly, to acknowledge Lori's provisional entrance into the family. I knew that her efforts to accept Lori were complicated by the fact that Pratima, her only other child, was "in a relationship" with another woman in Toronto, according to Facebook. That was another situation that the family didn't discuss.

I shifted my focus from the relationships embedded in the objects back to the objects themselves and to the material impossibility of fitting them all into the suitcases. Realizing that it would be difficult to persuade Srijana to leave behind any items that were intended as gifts for other people, I tried to whittle down the things she was taking for herself. "What about these notebooks? Surely you don't need all four of them."

"Won't I need them for my classes, though?" Srijana was planning to take a semester of ESL courses at a community college in Portland, where she would be living with Stephanie, an old friend who'd originally come to Nepal with the Peace Corps. Srijana's conversational English was already very good, but she wanted to improve it and to strengthen her reading and writing skills.

"Well, you can easily get them there. I wouldn't want the notebooks to be the thing that causes your bag to be overweight." I eventually convinced her to take only one notebook.

After several hours of packing and re-packing, weighing and re-weighing, we managed to get all of the bags to exactly the weight limit. "And if you're over by just one kilo or so, it probably won't be a problem," I told Srijana. "The people at the airport will usually let you get by if it's just a little bit over. So if you think of one or two more things you need to add, it should be fine."

"Yeah, it should be fine!" she agreed cheerfully. "Besides, I weigh less than a lot of the other people who will be on the airplane. So they should

let me take luggage that weighs a little more." I looked at her small, slight frame and smiled. She had a point. On my way out, I told her that I'd come over on Friday to say goodbye before she left for the airport.

On Thursday night, I called Srijana to see how the final preparations for her trip were going. "Well, I think I will need to work on the suitcases again," she said anxiously. "People have been bringing things over. . ."

"Oh, really?" I felt a sinking in my stomach. "Well, don't worry about it. I'll come over early and help you sort it out."

Temple bells were still ringing in the neighborhood when I arrived at her house the next morning. A heaping mound of items had appeared next to the suitcases that we'd packed so carefully just two days before. People had, indeed, been bringing things over. Srijana had apparently found it impossible to refuse anyone who had asked her to take something for a relative or a friend, no matter how distant the connection or how bulky the object.

"I'm not sure I can take all of this," she said hesitantly, as I stared at the pile.

"No, you cannot take all of it," I said briskly, "not unless you want to pay hundreds of dollars at the airport." I grabbed a piece from the top of the pile and held it up. It was a plastic baggie full of golden-orange powder, with "1 kilo" written on the side in black marker. "What is this?"

"It's turmeric. My neighbor gave it to me for her cousin."

"You can't take this!" I snapped in exasperation. "A whole kilo of turmeric? There's plenty of turmeric in America! Besides, you shouldn't carry bags of powder through international airports. The customs agents might think you are smuggling drugs."

I tossed the bag aside and looked up at her. In spite of my annoyance, I had to smile at the mental image of my respectable, ladylike friend as an international drug mule. Srijana started to giggle, and then we were both cracking up. I think she knew—I hope she knew—that I was frustrated not with her but with the people who were laying unreasonable burdens on her.

"You're right," she admitted, finally sobering up. "I can't take all of this. It's just too much." She started sorting through the pile, picking out a few items which she deemed essential—"You can't get lapsi candy in America"—and rejecting the rest.

To make space for the lapsi candy, Bhauju's finished sweater for Pratima, and a few other non-negotiables, we had to go back into the already-packed suitcases to try to weed out a few more kilos' worth. I resorted to my previous tactic of trying to discard redundant personal items.

"How about your face cream? You have the half-empty bottle, and then the full one. Why not just take the half-empty one, and then you can buy more when you run out."

"Yeah, but I use it every day. It's really a good cream."

"I know, but you can get more. They have Nivea in the United States."

"I just bought this full one. . ."

"You can use it after you come back!"

"Yes, but. . ." The rest of the sentence was unsaid, but I understood: she was thinking about the fact that she wasn't sure whether she would be coming back.

During all the months of preparation for her trip, I was the only person whom Srijana had told that she was thinking of settling in the United States permanently. The official story was that she was taking a leave of absence from her job to travel to the United States and study English for a semester while staying with her friend Stephanie in Oregon. That much was true. The also-true but untold part of the story was that she would be looking for a job in the United States, perhaps as a bank teller, because she'd worked as a manager for Kathmandu Development Bank for almost fifteen years. If she could secure such a job, she would have a socially acceptable reason to remain in the United States. She could bring her son over to live with her so that he could get an American education. Though she would continue to return to Nepal from time to time to keep up appearances, she would no longer have to live with her husband. The trip was a dress rehearsal for an upcoming separation.

She had first told me of this side of her plan three months before her departure. We were on a weekend vacation to Nagarkot, seizing the opportunity of a rare break in Srijana's busy schedule of work and family responsibilities. These short getaways were a core part of our friendship. We shared a love for travel and exploration, and my presence allowed Srijana to travel without fear of provoking gossip. Besides, she was far too social a person to enjoy the thought of solo travel. Once, she had reacted with mild horror when I told her that I was going to stay at a cabin near Buddhanilkantha for four or five days to get some writing done: "By yourself? Won't you be lonely? I could never do that."

On that afternoon, we were lucky enough to get clear weather and a gorgeous view of the Himalayas. We spent the afternoon on the terrace at our little guest house, drinking lemon sodas and chatting while we gazed at the mountains. In the course of the conversation, Srijana began to slowly open up about the fact that her marriage was an unhappy and abusive one. Her marriage had been arranged, and she'd met Subodh-ji – she always referred to him respectfully as Subodh-ji—only twice before their wedding. On the few occasions that I'd met him, I'd noticed how his stern and detached demeanor contrasted with Srijana's warm, good-humored sociality. But on that afternoon, she told story after story about his rigid inflexibility and controlling habits. He demanded an accounting of every rupee that she spent, even from her own salary. If food wasn't cooked exactly to suit his preferences, he would explode with rage. He had a tendency to make impulsive business deals and to wreak his violent anger on Srijana when those deals fell apart. More and more, he was beginning to direct this anger toward their twelve-year-old son Subin. Srijana was worried that Subin would be damaged, emotionally and perhaps physically, by his father. Even more than that, she was worried that Subin, who was beginning to show a stubborn streak, would grow up to become like his father.

"Are you thinking about divorcing him?" I finally asked.

"Oh no," she denied swiftly. "I wouldn't do that. What would people say?" In lieu of divorce, she'd formed her plan to build a separate life in the United States. The prospect of earning an American salary and getting an American education for Subin would be socially acceptable reasons for living apart from her husband. People might privately question whether there

were additional motives for the separation, but she wouldn't have to face widespread public censure. Her family's reputation would suffer no damage. "As long as I come visit from time to time, no one will say anything," she explained. "And that way, I can still see my family and friends, too." She had no real desire to leave Nepal or to live in the United States for its own sake. But to her, it seemed easier to start again on a new continent than to live as a divorced woman in Kathmandu. The fact that she was even considering this drastic step convinced me that the situation in her marriage was truly dire. After all, Srijana didn't even think that the prospect of staying alone for a few days sounded fun. Her life was so deeply rooted in her relationships with family members, friends, and neighbors that the possibility of a move represented a real crisis of the self.

"Do you think you might meet somebody else, if you're living apart from Subodh-ji? Is that part of what you're hoping for?" I asked tentatively, hoping the question would not offend her.

"No," she said firmly, "I don't ever want to be married again. I know what that's like. I don't need to know anything more about men or marriage. It would be like – what's that idiom? From one hot place to another?"

"Out of the frying pan, into the fire?"

"Yeah. Like that." She squinted up at the mountains. "Into the fire."

The packing was finally finished. Throughout the day, a steady stream of relatives and friends appeared to wish Srijana a good journey. A few of them brought gifts to send to others in America. Srijana politely promised to take the items to the airport to see if they could be included in the baggage, and then laid them aside. She was becoming more confident in determining which burdens of care she could accept and which she could not.

During a moment when we were alone, I asked Srijana how things were with Subodh-ji. "It's alright," she said in a low voice, with a tired look on her face. "I think he is starting to think that I might not come back. Yesterday morning he took me to the land registration office and made me sign over the house to his name, instead of mine. He said it was 'just in case anything happens' while I'm gone."

I raised my eyebrows. She shrugged, as if to say that it didn't really matter that she no longer had a legal claim to her own home. Just then Subin called from his bedroom: "Mamu! Where is my football jersey?" She went to help him look for it. Subin was packing up his own things; he would be spending most of his time at Bhauju and Prawin-dai's house while Srijana was away. I had promised her that I would check in on him.

I weighed each of the bags one final time. Twenty-three, twenty-three, and seven. I hoped that Srijana would be able to handle the weight, both of the things that she was taking and of the things that she was leaving behind.

Note

1. An earlier version of this story received Honorable mention for the 2015 Ethnographic Fiction Award of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology.