

The Wake Up Yell

“Bang-Bang...Ring-ring-ring-ring...Wake up sirs, have your dinner... hot bread, hot curry, tea, sweets...bang-bang... Wake up sirs”, a sudden raucous noise from a boy penetrated through the ears of travelers. It was late night. A bus full of passengers had just halted at a highway side restaurant that resembled a huge street-side snack-vendor of rural India. The



shouting kid had an extra-ordinarily irritating voice trained to break the already fragile sleep of the long-distance passengers aboard the state-owned buses. Several such buses used to halt at that restaurant. Unless they wake up, the restaurant would do no business at its peak hours: late nights.

A series of fluorescent tubes wrapped in transparent plastic foils of vibrant colors lit on the rustic lumber poles. These cluster of these colorful poles was a highway landmark which indisputably indicated the presence of a highway side

eatery at that spot. This particular highway restaurant of Belagaon, a small settlement in eastern India, was a brick hut with a large open space in front of it. The restaurant had three distinct sections. The left most section had four large clay ovens producing incredible amount of smoke. It also had a small counter used to serve tea in glass cups. In the center lay a huge opening that led to the internal eating area through the payment counter. The eating area had ten odd wooden tables with bamboo benches around them. It was spacious and had a unique blend of fragrance emanating from spicy fish curries, chopped onion salads and stale rice. The rear end of the eating area overlooked a farm full of fresh green mustard plants blossoming with bright yellow flowers. The right-side section of the restaurant had a round window deliberately hidden by a large signboard. The signboard, in an excessively cursive Hindi font, said: “The famous Bholu Dada’s Dhaba”. “Dhaba” meaning a typical Indian roadside restaurant for middle class customers. Unless very observant, few would make out what that section actually was meant for. An inconspicuous part of the restaurant, it had a better-lit seating area and several posters of semi-nude Bollywood actresses carelessly stuck on the mud walls. Its tables smelt of locally prepared alcohol and were densely occupied by khakhi-clad bus drivers and conductors. Special patrons of the restaurant, they were offered free food and hospitality by the restaurant owner in return of the deluge

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of customer base they brought to the restaurant.

Manilal's sleep, too, was broken; more by a series of shouting noises from irritated travelers that followed the suite. Woken up, the travelers started coming out of their buses. Within a few minutes, Manilal was surrounded by them. The extremely uncomfortable seats of the buses forced them to exit their slumber and come out of the buses. Moreover, a majority of them needed restroom which was, obviously, absent from the bus. The kid's yell added to their reason to wake up. One of them still struggling with his sleep on the bus shouted at the kid: "don't yell right in my ear you devil! ...get lost!" Several others followed. That the passengers shout at him like that was a part of the kid's strategy; as it helped in breaking their sleep further. As any other night, most passengers eventually did come out of their buses, bought some eatables or tea and sat wherever they found a place- half awake, half dozing.

Manilal lay on one of the rustic, woven cots laid outside the restaurant, under the moonlit sky. A huge cup half-filled with tea was still lying in his hand. He tried sipping it; but it was cold by now. He glanced around him. A couple enjoying their midnight tea occupied the next cot. Their young daughter, had been weeping for nothing while a teen-aged son kept staring at a cigarette advertisement poster that hung on the adjoining shack. There were many empty cots waiting to be occupied by the half-asleep passengers. Manilal spotted the kid at an embarrassing moment. An angry passenger annoyed by the kid's high-pitch

wake-up yells had just slapped the poor boy on his tender cheek. Due to the shock, something the boy was holding dropped on the ground from his hand.

Manilal and several other people also noticed this, but they carelessly ignored the incident as if nothing had happened. The annoyed slapper stared at fellow passengers canvassing their opinion on his volunteer act. He was now seeking appreciation for trying to help them who, he thought, were poor victim's of the kid's merciless midnight yell. No one cared to notice his act of bravery either and he slowly walked towards the tea counter of the restaurant. The kid made a bad face without any attempts to resist the slapper. He stepped back and started searching for what had dropped out of his hand. After a little effort, the kid found it. A curious Manilal fixed his glance at the boy's hand just to realize that it was a series of aluminum tubes tied together by a jute string, an improvised "mid-night yell instrument". The kid slid a small steel rod across the series of tubes making a sound that skillfully mixed with his loud wake up calls. The combination was a powerful cacophony that tested the passengers' patience; and most annoyingly, the strength of their sleep.

The flow of passengers from bus to the dhaba had stopped. The kid slowly moved towards Manilal without noticing him and sat on a cot beside Manilal's. His face buried in his chest, he murmured in a voice that only Manilal could hear-"Why did he bash me? He could have told me to shut up...". He knew he did not have the courage to say it loud to the man who slapped him. Neither did he expect

anyone else to listen to his murmuring. He remained silent for while, shaking his dirty tiny legs that hung against a side of the cot. Then he started playing his legs with small pieces of brick that lay below the cot. In a moment, he was totally into it, as if he forgot what had just happened to him. When he raised his face, one could easily notice a sense of triumph on his face. He stared at the number of passengers, who were now buying food and tea from the restaurant. This customer-base was his child, he thought!

Manilal was fully awake by now. He stared at his motorcycle that was parked against the fence. He had borrowed it from a cousin in Ranchi, a city around two hours from the dhaba. He could not have imagined such a solitary night at the dhaba, which was his favorite hangout around fifteen years ago, when he left his village for higher studies. One of the two sons of the only upper-caste-Brahmin family in Belagaon, Manilal spent most of his childhood with his tribal friend-Shukra playing hide-and-peek in the jungle, or climbing the rocks by the village temple. His father was a teacher in the local primary school and taught Mathematics and English to the penniless villagers as a government servant. Few months after Manilal left for his college; his family too moved to Ranchi city. He went to the medical school, and later specialized in psychiatry from Johns Hopkins University. Well-paid, settled and a green-card holder, Manilal had taken his parents to Washington DC where he was now an independent practitioner. Years of successful medical practice had afforded him more wealth than he needed. A strong desire to give

back to his native place was one of the reasons that had brought him to India this time. He had transferred a sum of twenty thousand dollars to his NRI account in India to be spent for a social cause in Belagaon. He had some faint ideas about how to spend that money, but he had not been able to make a decision.

Soon after Manilal left India, rural areas around Ranchi became labeled as “disturbed” due to heavy influence of Maoist philosophy. Several militant outfits had sprouted to combat the “corrupt” local governance system. Often, the conflict would manifest itself in violent armed encounters between the state-forces and the Maoists, more commonly known as “Naxals”. His brother, Shyam stayed back in Ranchi; and had joined the state police force. A year later, he was announced as the head of a Special Task Force that specialized in armed encounters with the Naxal outfits. His stories of bravery were frequently covered by local newspapers. However, to everyone’s surprise, he had moved over to a rather inconspicuous civilian role with Women’s Welfare Department. This happened when he was at the peak of his police-department career. The new job kept him moving from one place to another within the state. Consequently he was posted in his native village-Belagaon. AT that time Belagaon was not as safe as it earlier used to be, due to the Naxal insurgency. Manilal and his parents were persistent in their advice to quit the job and move to a city, but Shyam never acceded.

A few years after the parents moved to Washington DC with brother Manilal; the

bad news was sent to the family via phone- Shyam had mysteriously disappeared from his village. Their house was burnt by a mob of Naxals. Two months later, his blood stained shirt was found outside their burnt home. No one ever found his body. Manilal's parents never accepted that Shyam was dead; they kept following up with the local police and lawyers to continue the search for their son. Reluctant to say it loud to his grieved parents, Manilal had no reasons to believe that his brother would have been kept alive by the Naxals. The parents never allowed Manilal to personally go to their ancestral village in India and talk to the police. They were afraid that they could lose another son.

Manilal was a regular visitor of Ranchi's local newspaper websites. He frequently came across the stories about how Naxals retaliated against whom they considered to be the government's spy in the villages. Police staffs were the obvious targets that often had to take up the Central Investigation Department (CID) roles. Although Shyam never said so, Manilal had an impression that he was actually a police spy in Belagaon, which had become a hub of Naxal activities. The so called "Naxal insurgents" mostly belonged to the local tribal communities of the villages that were now outcast by the government system because of alleged radical and violent viewpoint. As per Manilal's belief, Shyam was an obvious target of the Naxal rebels. Moreover, during his overt police career, he was known as a hardliner against Naxals. The month before he joined the Women's Welfare Department, Shyam had been awarded by the state for

having "encountered" a band of Naxals and killing three of them.

In one of the previous encounters he had badly injured a pregnant woman, Sunayna who died immediately after delivering her baby a week later. The villagers believed that she died because of bullet wounds. It was followed by some newspaper stories that established that Sunayna was an innocent wife of a Naxal insurgent with no record of involvement in any type of crimes against the state. The police department kept defending Shyam's killings; but the Sunayna episode had attracted extensive national media coverage, giving Naxals a solid reason to chase Shyam. Manilal remembered how strongly he had urged Shyam to quit his job; and move to elsewhere. Shyam, in turn, had never imagined his life outside his native area; and kept refusing Manilal's requests.

More recently, Belagaon had become a peaceful place; and was no more affected by insurgency. Strikingly, there had been fewer cases of corruption by the state servants too. Earlier, Manilal frequently visited India for Business purposes; but deliberately skipped his trip to Belagaon for obvious reasons. To go up to Ranchi, just a few hours away from Belagaon, and still not visit his native village used to be an emotionally challenging decision. Thanks to the peace resumed, this time, he was able to convince his parents and allowed to drive to Belagaon.

"Sahib, please have some tea", the kid urged as if he owned the dhaba and wanted to give away free food to customers. By now the boy was looking at

Shyam with his hands locking each other over his back. The sense of authority in his request was irresistible. Manilal gave a smiling look at the boy and said, "Sure, what is your name?", and in the meanwhile, extended his hand to mildly grab the "mid-night yell instrument" from his hand. The boy was happy to show off his asset. "Butru...Butru is my name", he said. Butru was around eleven, had dark skin and a thin body. His thin legs showed dirt, but his cloths were clean and tidy.

"Do you know Sahib, my uncle made this instrument for me last year before he left for jungle", Butru continued. The material of the instrument reminded Manilal of his childhood days friend- Shukra; a local tribal boy whose father was a railway laborer. Shukra and Manilal spent most of their time together- at school and after it. Shukra's family lived next to Manilal's in a twig shack. His hut had thatch on the roof and the walls were reinforced by steel tubes similar to what the instrument was made of.

There were times when Manilal's mother was ill; and Shukra's family would cook food in their hut for his whole family. When Manilal's father offered to pay for it, Shukra's family would strongly refuse to accept the money saying they were a family. Later, the two families had laid a bamboo fence enclosing the two houses. A spacious open courtyard thus secured between the two dwellings had a common main entrance. Manilal and Shukra studied together in the courtyard which later had a bamboo shed. Manilal fondly remembered the summer nights that Shukra and he spend together during

exam times studying under the bamboo shed. Shyam was not in their gang. He studied indoors and slept early. The lantern lit nights were spent chewing peanuts roasted by Manilal's mother. Sometimes, Shukra would bring a pitcher filled with cold, black tea. The combination was awesome and wood keep them awake sometimes till the morning rays of sun would brighten the horizon.

Shukra was poor at Mathematics and Science. But, he always outwitted Manilal in language and literature classes. They both went to the school where Manilal's father taught. While Manilal was preparing for medical school entrance exam in Belagaon, Shukra had already started his college degree in Political Science and History. They did not contact each other while attending college. They just assumed, they could get to each other whenever they wanted. In the meanwhile, Manilal's father got transferred to another village in the neighboring state. Although the family retained the house at Belagaon, unfortunately with time the communication gap between Manilal and Shukra only kept widening.

Manilal started his studies at the medical school in Ranchi. From there, he had tried to call his Belagaon acquaintances several times to get updated about Shukra. He, however, could not hear much about him. By the time he started his own clinic in DC; Shukra had turned into merely an object of past for him. Now that Manilal had an opportunity to visit his village, a little hope of reunion with his childhood friend titillated him. "Sahib, give me five rupees; and I will get you another cup of rather hot tea from the counter", Butru

broke the silence. "Sure! I will give you ten rupees, and please get two cups of tea; one for yourself...can we talk after that?", Manilal said while extending a ten-rupee bill to Butru. "Sure; but you see, I am a busy officer. I must leave when the next bus arrives...", Butru sounded like a boss this time. Manilal could not stop his smile. He pinched Butru on his cheek affectionately.

While Butru walked towards the tea counter, Manilal stared at the restaurant. Its smoke tower remained unchanged since his childhood days: a tall granite tube coming out of the pitched roof resembled a spire. During the foggy, late winter nights; while preparing for their exams, Manilal and Shukra sometimes came to this dhaba. Having some hot tea gave an energizing break. Their families never knew about it. To avoid highway traffic, they came crossing the farms with muddy pathways. When all they could see around was thick, white fog, the orange stream of smoke coming out of this chimney helped them in locating the dhaba.

Butru was back with two cups of tea. He was more interested in Manilal's motorcycle than him.

Staring curiously at the wheels, he spread his hands and opened the palm; it had a five-rupee coin. "Sahib, I got my tea for free... please take your five rupees back", Butru said and spread his palm holding some coins.

Manilal refused: "Butru, keep the change... and don't tell you boss about it...so where do you live?"

"In the school shed... they have beds and bathrooms behind the headmaster's office... may I sit on your motorcycle?"

"Do you go to school?"

"Yes, to the evening school in the village ... you see, I sleep through most of the day to remain awake at nights for my duty. Evening school is the only option for me..."

"Is it the same school that lies between the eastern pond and the Marwari Dharamsala?"

"...yes, it is. How do you know that, sahib?"

"...you know Butru, that is where my father taught, that's where I studied, that's where my brother and my friends studied..."

By then, Butru had gotten up and jumped on the motorcycle's seat. He spread his hands in an attempt to grab the two handles. However, smaller hands only allowed him to grab one handle at a time. Excited to be able to "ride" the motorcycle, he shot his next query:

"Sahib, did you bring this from Ranchi?"

"What does your father do?" Manilal asked Butru completely ignoring what the kid has asked.

"He is no more..."

Manilal felt sad, "When did he die, Butru?"

"I don't remember... it was a hundred years ago...you own this motorcycle, don't you?"

"hmmm...what does your mother do?"

"She is dead too... actually, I have never seen her... my uncle says police shot her before I was born... she lived just to bring me to this world..."

"Really!?" Manilal asked with amazement; he felt a sudden chill in his

body, but kept asking” Do you know her name?”

“Yes, sahib... Sunayna... Sunayna Chamaar...”

Shocked, and confused, here was Manilal talking to a boy whose mother was slain by his own brother! Sunayna case was the controversy that, he believed, had brought his own brother to his death.

His heart started pounding faster with a deep sense of guilt; a guilt that might not have been justified; but was not completely misplaced.

He somehow stopped the emotional outburst and looked at Butru’s round face. Butru was one of the Manilals and Shukras and Shyams. Years of separation from this soil had already made Manilal poignant. Butru seemed to be a gateway to his memories of childhood. He, however had no courage to dig deeper into the Sunayna episode. To change the topic, he asked with a shivering voice: “Butru, does Sahu’s grocery store still sells biscuits, under the mango tree?”

“Sahu, Krishna’s grandfather? Yes-yes, he does! But how do you know about him, sahib?”

“...you see, I belong here... this is my village as much as it is yours... this is our village...Do you know one Shukra Kumhar, Butru? He was my childhood friend ...” Manilal said all these in a breath, as if his heart would burst before he would breathe the next spell of the air emanating from the farms of his very own village. He did not expect an answer; he only wanted to keep asking questions that had remained unanswered for years.

“Oh yes, sahib, Shukra sir is our headmaster... Can I now kickstart your

motorcycle before the next bus comes? I only want to hear the sound...”

Suddenly, they heard honks. Another bus had arrived by now. The sky was now brighter and pink. Disappointed, Butru walked towards the bus without saying anything to Manilal. This was going to be his last bus for the night. Manilal stood up, grabbed Butru’s hand and said, “son, come sit on this motorcycle. I will give you a ride home. Also, if you could show me where your headmaster lives...”

“...But I have this job to do, sahib, the next bus is here already...”

“No, more, Butru”, Manilal said. He now knew where to spend his twenty thousand dollars. Butru smiled, as Manilal’s own son does.