

Mr. Koirala goes to work

The Maoist strike had so far been comparatively peaceful, with only a vehicle or two burnt, and a couple of scuffles with the police. At Naya Baneshwor, Mr. Koirala could hear the Maoists taunting the riot police with their newly-found slogans, but apart from that, the pavement on which he was walking was filled with bystanders who looked at the altercation with a rather inquisitive look. The road dividers had been dislodged, and a few broken down by the iron rods the Maoists were carrying. Bricks and stones lay strewn across the road, but those were the remnants of the morning's scuffle. A Mao leader had been shoved back by a brave cop, who in turn received a pretty big stone on his forehead. Then the usual stone-throwing began, with the cops hiding behind their fiber-glass shields, and then when the Maoists ran out of stones or energy or whatever it was, the cops charged.

Mr. Koirala knew all this because he watched the news before leaving for work. Ever since bandhs became a weekly affair, his office had stopped making them holidays. Imagine, a sarkari office not giving a holiday on a bandh. Not that there was much work; in fact, there was no work at all. Bandhs automatically meant no one would come to pay their water bills; so all the employees just turned up, chatted for a bit, signed the attendance register, drank some tea, then went out to the park to eat some peanuts. Mr. Koirala had enjoyed doing that for the first few bandhs; after all, he was getting paid to not work. But the most difficult part for him was walking to work, and that was when he began resenting it.

Mr. Koirala lived near the Airport, in a rented two-bedroom house with a Chinese sofa in the hall and his wife. They'd been married for about five years now, with Mr. Koirala touching the mid-thirties now. No, there weren't any children. Mrs. Koirala had decided she wouldn't raise a baby in such a small house; Mr. Koirala had to get a promotion, after which he would be eligible for a quarter in the main part of the city, near Singha Darbar.

So Mr. Koirala diligently walked to work; on other days he would take the micro at nine, but as today was a bandh, he left home only around eleven.

As he neared the crossing outside the Convention Hall, Mr. Koirala could hear an increase in the pitch of the sloganeering. "Down with military supremacy. We want civilian supremacy," the boys were shouting. Ever since their chief tried to pick up a

petty fight with the chief of the army, these boys had begun a new round of slogans. There they were, in the middle of the crossing, pointing fingers at the riot police that stood in a perfect row across the street.

Then, suddenly, Mr. Koirala saw a stone whiz past in the air. It took only about a second to land, but by then, the riot police had charged, batons and lathis in hand, screaming, 'Catch that fucker. Don't let him run'.

For Mr. Koirala, it was turning out to be a serious bandh. He'd never experienced the wrath of the cops, for he hadn't bothered to attend those rallies or speeches during the Jana Andolan. Therefore, his experience in what-to-do-when-a-cop-charges-at-you was, for lack of a better word, limited. So he ran back in the direction he had come from, turning right down into an alley that veered towards the river.

Behind him, he could hear the shouts and abuses. 'Motherfucker,' he heard, and he turned back to find a cop particularly interested in him, waving his four feet long stick around his head.

Mr. Koirala ran, and suddenly took a left into a narrower alley. The cop didn't bother following him, so he took a few more strides, and bent down with his hands on his knees. The sudden movement in the alley unnerved a stray dog, which bolted with its tail between its legs. Mr. Koirala huffed and puffed; the last exercise he'd done was six months back, when his wife forced him to climb the steps up to Swayambhu Stupa.

Mr. Koirala heard a sudden snigger in the alley. Startled, he looked up to find a woman washing her clothes in her courtyard, trying hard to suppress a smile.

"You think it's funny?" Mr. Koirala was angry; he knew he wasn't in a top shape, yet what could one do if a cop chased one the way that idiot came after Mr. Koirala.

"No, no. It's your face. It's all red. Puffed up, like a dhoti's samosas."

The girl seemed to be in her late twenties. She continued scrubbing the red petticoat that had gathered up a bit of lather, and poured a mug of water from the bucket next to her. She had a pimpled face, yet all Mr. Koirala could notice was the mole on her chin. It stood out like a spot of black on a white bedsheet, too easy to miss at first glance, yet, if one lingered on, it would be the only spot one's eyes would focus on.

"Do you want some water?" she asked him. Mr. Koirala could just nod.

She quickly rinsed her hands, and went inside. Mr. Koirala tried to take in what her house looked like—a single floor building with bright pink walls, boundary walls made of concrete blocks, a small gate that said the owner didn't own any two-

wheelers, and a clothes line on the terrace. He quickly glanced back to the store across the street when he heard her coming back.

“Here.” She offered him a stainless steel tumbler, with etchings on the rim that spelled out an initial: BS. Probably a wedding gift, Mr. Koirala thought, as he gulped down the water.

“Are you a Maobadi?” she asked him.

“No. No. That wretched cop thought I was one too. Saale, tried to hit me with his danda. Thank god I ran, natra bhane he would have hit me on the head.”

“Then what are you doing walking around where cops are on a bandh? You think you are Rajesh Hamal?” And she laughed, again, this time more heartily. Mr. Koirala noticed the laughter better now: it came in breaks, a sudden ha-ha, then an abrupt stop, then another ha-ha. He wanted to think of a witty retort, something that would shut her up, but he couldn’t. Instead, he asked her, “Why? You think everyone who runs from the police is a film star?”

The girl looked surprised. What sort of a remark was that, Mr. Koirala thought to himself. “I think I will go now. Probably take the back way.”

Mr. Koirala started to pace his steps rapidly towards the other end of the alley. There was another way that he could take towards the main road at Maitighar. From there, he would walk to Tripureshwor, where his office was. But as he neared the last house before a turn, he looked back, even though he didn’t know why he did so. The girl was there, standing next to the boundary wall. Her red fariya with its floral patterns stood out in the pink of the wall behind her, and Mr. Koirala could still make out the mole.

That evening, Mr. Koirala felt a sudden urge to meet the girl again. He hadn’t even asked the girl’s name, he thought to himself. He hadn’t told his wife of the morning’s altercation, or that he had been chased by the police. She was cooking tareko alu, frying the potatoes gently in the deep pan whose rims had turned black with all the smoke.

The news was repeating today’s chaos, even as the reporter stood pretty far away from the smoke that was emanating from the background. He was holding the mike in one hand, and there were the usual people who wished to get themselves imprinted in television history.

‘Three people were critically injured when the police lathi-charged the Maoists today at Naya Baneshwar. The Maoists were shouting slogans against the police when the lathi-charge occurred. Maoist leader Taraman Pun was hit on the head, while two others were beaten up as well.’

“These bloody press-wallas. I was there. The Maoists threw the stones first. Obviously the police will charge.” Mr. Koirala suddenly became angry. His forehead started throbbing the way it always did when his blood pressure rose.

“These hawaldars are also no less. Why did they have to hit a leader?” His wife asked. Mr. Koirala looked at Mrs. Koirala contemptuously. She didn’t have any idea of how things worked, especially in Nepal. She would always blame the sarkar, whether it was for retaliating policemen or rising tarkari prices.

“How many more bandhs will these guys call for?” His wife tried to assuage him.

“They’ve said three more days. Nagarik Sarbochhchata they call it. Bloody civilian supremacy. It’s nothing but their own supremacy that they want. The police is doing right. They should bash all these bastards. What use are those big boots of theirs?” Mr. Koirala continued.

“Hare. Forget it. Come have dinner. I have cooked you some nice tarkari.”

After dinner, while his wife was washing the dishes, Mr. Koirala thought about the policeman who had chased him. Then he went back to the girl, and her mole. There was something about her that seemed to remind him of someone. He thought hard, and instead concluded the girl seemed to be a Newar, especially with the way she had spoken to him. Newars always roll their tongues while spelling ‘t’. Mr. Koirala was sure she was a Newar.

The television was playing some stupid Hindi soap that his wife always watched at 9:15. Mr. Koirala turned over to his side, away from his wife, and told her curtly, “I am sleeping.”

Mrs. Koirala just nodded, and continued watching the serial. The girl continued to fill up Mr. Koirala’s mind, and he rolled back, this time facing his wife. He put his arms around her stomach with its little layers of fat tucking into one another, and pulled her closer.

“Mmm. Wait for this serial to finish.”

Mr. Koirala moved even closer, this time with an erection that throbbed in his checked pyjamas.

“Hare. Wait for fifteen minutes more. Watch the serial.”

Mr. Koirala suddenly got up, snatched the remote from his wife’s hands, and turned the television off. Mrs. Koirala’s eyes rolled in surprise, and then she smirked, and said, “How come you are feeling as if tonight was our honeymoon night?”

Mr. Koirala didn’t answer that, and instead pulled her closer.

“Wait; let me take off the sari, and you switch off the light.”

Mr. Koirala nodded. He quickly got out of bed, and went to the corner next to the bathroom to turn the switch off. By then, Mrs. Koirala had got inside the blanket, her hair free of the clip she used to tie it into a bun.

He smelt her hair first. It smelt of fried oil and spices. His mind went back to when they had just got married; the first time they got into bed together, he didn’t know what to do. He just curled up in a corner, while she lay on her back, staring at the ceiling.

“Hare. Will you only smell my hair?” She asked him.

Mr. Koirala got irritated by her question. He wanted to savour her, and here she was, refusing till a moment ago, and now desperate to get it over with. He got on top of her, and slowly pushed himself inside her. She looked at him and smiled, her crooked tooth prominently visible. He closed his eyes, and began pushing harder, until he came with a groan.

That night, Mr. Koirala felt like he wanted a cigarette. He used to smoke, but had quit when she asked him to, after they were married. Now, he really wanted one. He lay on his stomach, his head facing the bedside shelf with its books and telephone. Mrs. Koirala had already slept, her soft breaths muffling his constant shuffles.

He tried to sleep again, but his mind raced with a million thoughts. He would have to walk to work tomorrow as well, and he thought about the route he would take. He thought of the girl again, and wondered if she would be there again. What would she be doing? Is she married? Wonder what her husband does?

The next day, the news spoilt Mr. Koirala’s plans. The anchor had announced that Naya Baneshwar would be barred for pedestrians because of yesterday’s violence.

The police had laid out an intricate cordon, ready to meet yesterday's stone fall with tear gases and rubber bullets, the announcer said.

"How will you go to work?" His wife asked him.

"I think I will have to take a detour. Go via Shankhamul or something."

"Just be careful. Don't come out on the main road until you reach Babar Mahal. You never know with these Maoists."

"Huncha. I will call you once I reach."

The road was in a worse condition than the day before. Till yesterday, it just had bricks and stones. Today, all the dividers had been upturned, and little black circles of smoke and ash were all that were left of the burnt tires. At one intersection, the Maoists had put up two drums filled with tires, and it was still burning while Mr. Koirala walked on the pavement. He quickly took a left turn towards Shankhamul, and made his way through the alley.

As he was nearing the girl's house, he thought he could hear her laugh. He quickened his pace, wanting to see her before she saw him. She was outside in her courtyard again, this time speaking to her neighbour, a fat woman just like any other middle-aged woman Mr. Koirala saw on the roads.

"Look, look, it's yesterday's Dai again," she pointed him out.

He blushed a little, but a heavy weight lifted itself off his heart. At least she remembered him.

"What to do. Today, though, there isn't anyone chasing me."

"I was just telling Didi about that. It was quite funny; the way you ran down the slope."

Mr. Koirala blushed again.

"La, Sanu bahini, I will go right now. Have to cook Babu's lunch." The woman left, leaving Mr. Koirala relieved. At least there wouldn't be any questions as to why he was there again.

"Ani, Dai, where are you going today? Office again? Have tea at least today?"

He pretended to check his watch, then realized he didn't have to. He nodded in agreement, while she brought out a stool on the courtyard for him to sit on.

"Come in; no one's at home right now."

'No one's at home.' What did that mean? Did that mean her husband wasn't home? Or did she live with her parents?

Mr. Koirala looked around the courtyard. The clothes line was still there, this time with some more petticoats. He couldn't see any male clothing on the line. But that didn't mean anything. There was a small tap in the corner. A few used dishes lay scattered beside it. She had tried to make a little garden in the corner next to the tap, a row of bricks enclosed a little bit of earth, where she had planted godavari flowers.

"Here's your tea. I can promise you, even your wife doesn't make tea as good as this," she told him, coming out with two cups on a steel plate.

He was quite surprised that she guessed he was married. He didn't wear his engagement ring; his wife had told him to keep it at home after there were several muggings near his neighbourhood.

"Don't worry Dai. You don't have to tell Bhauju you had tea better than her's." She smiled, the mole appearing to increase in size when she did that. She pulled another stool opposite him, and sat down on it.

"Hoina, no. I was just wondering how you guessed I was married."

"Ha ha. Dai, come on. No bachelor will hesitate to speak to a girl like you do," she said, smiling even more.

This time, Mr. Koirala noticed her tooth was crooked too. The one just next to corner of her lips, and when she smiled wide, it would jut out and fit into that cleft.

"Where is your husband?" he asked her.

"My husband's in Saudi; this is his house."

"You live alone?"

"No, no. My sister lives with me. But she's gone to our parents' house because her school's closed for the bandh. So I am alone for these three days."

"And what do you do?"

"Nothing. I stay at home and wait for her. What else will I do?"

Mr. Koirala couldn't think of an answer. He wanted to continue this conversation, but realized he didn't have anything to say. He just sipped the tea, his eyes fixated on her crooked tooth.

"Where do you work?"

"At the water utility."

"So you are the one responsible for cutting off my water supply?"

Mr. Koirala was flustered once again. He didn't know what this girl was doing to him. It was like she had flabbergasted him; he was unable to think of a reply, and at the same time, he tried to figure whether she was being coquettish.

“Dai. Don’t be serious. I am just joking.”

She stood up, and pulled the wooden stool closer to him. Mr. Koirala gulped his spit down, and realized it was hot tea that he had actually swallowed.

“Hatteri. Wait, wait. I will get you water.”

She ran inside, and came out with a plastic bottle. He quickly grabbed the bottle, and drank to calm his burnt tongue. More than the tongue, he was trying to calm himself down. What was he doing here? Why hadn’t he moved on and started walking to his work? What was this girl?

The girl stretched out her hand, and he handed the bottle back to her. Their fingers brushed, and Mr. Koirala held on to her little finger. She looked at him, and pulled that finger back.

There was a sudden rush in his head. Did he just do something he wasn’t supposed to do? Did someone see him? Was the neighbour watching them?

The girl sat down on the stool again, put the bottle on the ground, and said, “You want to come inside?”

As he snuggled in close to her, she pulled him closer, hungrily. She smelt of cardamom, and a little bit of detergent. He lifted her petticoat quickly, and took off her blouse. She said, “Wait,” and slowly unbuttoned his pants. No, not there, he thought to himself, as he realized this was something his wife had never done to him. She slowly held him, and took him into her mouth. Mr. Koirala moaned, and for the first time in his life, realized what those men in the blue films he used to watch actually felt.

Mr. Koirala called his workplace and told them he couldn’t come because of the bandh. He said the police were everywhere, and made some excuse as to how they chased him around. His colleagues said they would sign the register for him.

“What is your name?” He asked her.

“You tell me yours first, then I will tell you mine,” she said, coming closer to him, her naked breasts brushing against his bare chest.

“Mahesh,” he told her.

“Gauri,” she replied, and lay her head in his arms.

They lay like that for a while. Mr. Koirala checked his watch, and saw it was already two o'clock.

"You have to go somewhere?" She asked him.

"No. I can go back home by around four."

"Good. At least I can sleep for a while."

"So you think I am a pillow?"

"Yes you are; a big, fat pillow."

Mr. Koirala pulled her closer, and this time, he felt her let go. He entered her slowly, taking his time, while he tried to savour every bit of her. She moaned softly, her eyes closed, her hips trying to match his movement, her legs wrapped around his.

Mr. Koirala walked back home when the rioting had subsided. He confirmed the news on the small television set in her room, and took the same alleyway he'd walked earlier in the morning. The third day's strike had been called off; the Maoists had negotiated with the government to ensure some concessions. Nothing great, but at least it showed they could bring the country to a halt.

Mr. Koirala was disappointed with the Maoists. They couldn't even live up to their promises, it seemed. He was looking forward to the third day of the strike; he thought he could leave home a little early and say he was taking a longer route to work because there was too much disturbance yesterday. Now, he would have to take his daily micro, get stuffed in that can of sardines with all the sweat and stink.

Still, he was sure there will be another bandh. He was sure his leaders would not disappoint him. Maybe he would get to see Gauri again that day. Or, he thought, maybe I can leave home early one day, and take the micro till the crossing, and walk down the slope....