

I have a friend in Nepal. I edited one of his novels, which was published a few years ago in India. He has sent me these short stories:

So close, yet so far

It was just half past eight in the morning when Rajesh was about to approach the cement factory of Chovar which stopped operating a few years back. Every day, earlier, Rajesh started from his home at around eight am to reach his office when it was at Kalimati. But these days the trading wing, in which he worked, of his company has shifted to New Baneshwor. It compelled him to start earlier by at least one hour to reach his office on time.

He joined this job barely out of his teens though he had passed the school with very good marks. Only because his father became bedridden due to a chronic disease from which he never recovered he had to start working early in his life.

There was a need to pay for his father's medicines. Also he had to look after the farming in his family's ancestral land. Working in the fields he always resented so he hired labourers to plant the crop or to harvest. He however liked to work in an office in his job.

He thought earlier that he would complete his University education while working as well. The condition of his father deteriorated in the meanwhile and he forced Rajesh to get married. The presence of a young wife changed his outlook of the world.

The romance of life appeared to have peaked for him, as Rajesh started resenting his job and its tyrannical requirements - to which he now started reaching on a bicycle to save the time to be with his wife. At this time his first daughter was born to his wife.

The aspiration of higher education too was abandoned, though he had earlier joined the evening class of a university campus which was on the way to his office. A university degree might have helped him in finding a better job.

His father passed away a few months after the birth of his second daughter. He was very disappointed for not having seen the face of a grandson, though he admired both his granddaughters very much.

There were more family duties for Rajesh now for being the eldest son. He arranged the college education for his brother, in which he did poorly. Then he found him a job which paid very little. On the insistence of his mother he arranged his marriage to a girl from a nearby village.

It all reached a plateau when he found that the matters of a married man with children in a joint family appeared consuming most of his time and energy- whatever was left of them after the job hours.

It never occurred to him to leave for a job to a distant Arabian country, from where a few of his fellow villagers have returned apparently with a fortune, apart from amassing a Japanese color TV, a video cassette player and a tape recorder with radio, after working there for a couple of years.

It was a time when cable TV was still not available and the state owned TV provided a few hours' programs in the morning and evening which mostly focused on the activities of the Royal family- both as news and as features.

But the video cassettes of Hindi movies could be enjoyed when TV programs were not available. If one wished to receive the TV programs from the Indian channel called Doordarshan, an antenna had to be placed higher on the roof, which had to be continuously adjusted to receive the signal that was often very tenuous making the pictures shaky and unclear.

The homes which received Doordarshan TV signal well were always crowded by neighbors, as the dramas it offered were very popular, including the religious ones titled *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

A few of his villagers, who went to an Arabian country, almost immediately returned empty-handed. They told they were asked to do tough jobs like that of a shepherd in the unbearable heat on a salary which was a fraction of what they were promised, though they were promised also a domestic helper's job or that of a driver, in which one was not exposed to the extreme heat, by the brokers who arranged their visa after charging them heavily for the same.

Some of them had sold away their ancestral land to pay for the visa and could not recover their money on returning, as the broker has simply disappeared. They all however, always complained about the bad treatment they had received from the people in an Arabian country. For Rajesh the idea of leaving his family behind even for a few years was unthinkable, for an

opportunity in an Arabian-or similar other- job was dubious at best.

He nowadays found that riding bicycle in the ever-busier growing traffic in the narrow roads of the city had denied him all these years the opportunity to observe things around him. Also, with his wife getting older and his daughters reaching puberty there were very few moments of privacy for them, in their small crowded house.

It was shared by his brother's wife and their two daughters and his mother. His mother had lost the hope of having a grandson after having four grand daughters. Rajesh and his brother had told her that they do not want to have any more children.

Rajesh found himself in a bad mood if he stayed home longer. He was in a hurry to leave home every morning and returned late. He gave up riding bicycle to his job and instead walked to it like in his younger days. His job now has turned into a blissful escape for him from his home. The day-to-day matters of the joint family and society could never engage him much, though he dutifully did his best to attend them all these years after his father's death.

Of late, he had become suspicious if his life will be consumed by the family responsibilities without giving him anything in return but the persuasive words from his mother and wife.

.....

He stared into the faces for sometime while approaching them on the way to his office. But on coming nearer he pretended looking elsewhere, particularly if it was a pretty woman.

Coming across of so many young beautiful faces every day, some of them of young college-girls in their distinct uniforms with a very small skirt revealing their thighs, made him think if his journey was worthwhile.

He marveled at how the fashion keeps on changing for those girls and their schools.

In such moods he thought that in spite of his increasing age and a life burdened with domestic responsibilities his romance of life was still alive. This thought kept him going on cheerfully.

He could have stayed back home and worked in the fields like his father, to grow vegetables to earn a better money than the salary he was getting from his employer.

But coming to the city to work at an office had its charm which he could show off to his fellow villagers. To him the city and his village were two different worlds which were so close yet so far.

As his daughters grew up he found them also growing shier to discuss a matter with him. They preferred to mostly be in the company of their mother when they were at home.

When ever he was free at home and there was privacy he found that his wife was often busy with household work like picking green vegetables or making threads of cotton to burn in oil during the evening prayer everyday exopt when she was menstruating. Her cycles though had become irregular now and a few wrinkles have appeared on her face besides a few grey hairs on her head.

This type of work took hours to complete. He grew enraged at

times and thought that his wife was deliberately ignoring his calls to be intimate with him. He often asked her to instead cook other vegetables than the green ones, which could be directly washed and cooked.

But she continued to give most of her mornings to picking green vegetables, like the shoots of pumpkin, in the kitchen. He cursed in his heart the radio ads which promoted such foods which they claimed were rich in vitamin A, by their female announcers in their melodious, flattering voice, as he left for his office.

‘Vitamin A!’ Rajesh repeated with remorse in his mind as he walked on to his office. His bad mood has not improved this morning. There often were programs to administer a dose of vitamin A to young children by the government, helped by an INGO, on a ‘Vitamin A day’.

The radio advertisements warned for several days before that day that only one doze was sufficient for a child for his lifetime. But the Kanti childrens’ hospital reported several emergency cases on the next day where it could revive some children with a great difficulty from the toxicity of the vitamin A. The greedy mothers gave their children several dozes of it, thinking that they will become healthier by it.

During winter the days were shortened by many hours. Rajesh left or returned home on a working day while it was almost dark. He could have also used a bus saving him one hour’s time one-way. But he found that the bus was always very crowded during morning and evening and went around with its roof full of passengers.

There also happened a few accidents in the meanwhile involving those over- crowded busus claiming many lives. So unless there was a pressing need or hurry, like some engagement at home to perform a religious ritual, Rajesh preferred to walk to his job.

Earlier he had more time to spend at home as his office remained closed for two days a week. He was young then and liked to be with his wife. But the new Indian-Bengali manger of it lately has reduced the weekly holidays to only one, on Saturdays, arguing that a trading company must remain open to do the business. Rajesh felt no qualms about it. He liked to be at his office more now.

His job in the beginning was that of a peon, in which he either prepared tea for the staff or cleaned the cups, or took the letters from his office to different offices of the other trading companies.

During the next few years he learnt to use a few words of English. He practiced them over the phone while the lady receptionist, who was short in height and wore dresses which could barely contain her big breasts, was away for some reason, as she often was, from her desk.

Seeing his initiative the manager did not hire another receptionist when the existing one left. He had found that the trained receptionists were mostly women who demanded a higher salary and left job on even a slight pretext. The manager instead asked Rajesh to take up the job, with a little increase in his salary. Rajesh took it with pleasure and there were no more advertisements in 'The Katmandu Post' newspaper from his

company looking for a smart young lady receptionist who had a two-wheeler and a driving license and excellent communication skills and computer literacy, afterwards.

Rajesh no more was expected to prepare tea or do the washings at the office, for which there was another employee now. He, instead, wearing a tie and coat, now sat behind the counter-cum desk and spoke over phone in whatever English he could manage, before he switched to the local language. There were other jobs of file keeping or looking after the delivery of letters through the peon. For him it was a bonus to flaunt his coat and tie to his villagers everyday while he left for work or returned from it, who were mostly peasants.

.....

Walking past the cement factory at Chovar he recalled that it had a cloud of dust near it when it operated till a few years ago. The dust settled on the houses, trees and crops in the fields in the locality and on the nearby hills, turning everything into a gray-white color, if one looked at the area from a distance like a hill on the other side across the plateau next to the factory.

Only during monsoon the dust was washed away by the rains to reveal the different colors of crops, hills and the forests in it.

It was actually due to the activism of the people living in the villages near the factory, in collaboration with an NGO in Kathmandu which worked about the environmental issues that the government had to close down this factory it owned. It is a different matter that it made the Indian made cement to fulfill the soaring demand.

However the pollution did not improve much in Kathmandu even after the cement factory at Chovar stopped operating. One could see the multitude of the brick kilns rising over other constructions near them, belching a thick black smoke in the air.

These brick kilns at times used worn out automobile tires as a fuel, instead of the expensive coal or diesel, to make the already bad air even worse. But they were privately owned by people with connection in higher places, so no amount of activism could close them.

It was the frenzy of the construction of buildings in Kathmandu which created the demand for the industries like those making cement or bricks. One could see the scar in the hillock above Tokha village far in the north of Kathmandu, which was caused by bulldozers to create a housing colony there.

The escalating insurgency in the hinterland in the recent past almost appeared like consuming the whole country, before it was arrested by a ceasefire between the rebels and the government. It firmly placed the rebels into the polity and occasionally into the government with a popular mandate.

There was also a daily deteriorating security situation along the border in the south during that time, as the conflict has not really ended after the cease fire and has been increasingly turning out to be ethnical instead of ideological, though the King had been ousted from the scene as a major player.

It made the people pour into Kathmandu in ever greater numbers where the normal daily life was largely intact. It put every available resource under a great stress. In addition,

Kathamndu city offered everybody an opportunity, or so the people thought, who had migrated here.

.....

But his village was still quite far away from all this madness-Rajesh often thought.

Coming to the city every morning after walking for almost two hours and then return similarly in the evening made him think as if he was just a visitor to it, though there were signs that the city was encroaching into the villages nearby at an alarming pace.

There were brand new posh bungalows made of concrete which had big glass windows and solar heaters and shining automobiles in their porticos, next to a cow-shed of a dilapidated ancient house in a village near Kathmandu.

There still were garlands of red chilies or bundles of garlic plants with their bulbs dangling on the walls of the ancient house which was made of red bricks and mud. It had a wooden balcony next to the small wooden windows on the upper floor.

After reaching the bend of the road at Chovar his climb was over and he turned to look over the Kathmandu Valley into which now he had to descend. By turning his back to it for a short distance before he turned once again to face it but from the bottom almost, from where the city looked tall and imposing, he reached the Kathmandu city every day.

The sun fell on his face. It was mild and yet not warm. He looked into the Kathmandu city. The buildings were all that he could see. Except for the landmark structures like Dharhara

tower and Swyambhu dome, and a few tall buildings, Kathmandu city was in the shadow of the rising sun.

However, far in the horizon in the East, beyond the airport, from where aero planes were taking off, the big ones to the international destinations and the small ones to the domestic ones, there were hills with lush green forests before the white ones of Himalaya.

Himalayas splendidly were illuminated by the sun. The third peak from the right was Mount Everest, as some one has told him. But due to the strange arrangement of light it looked smaller than the peaks next to it.

He paused for a while to once again marvel at the scene which never failed to mystify him. The ugliness of the crowded identical artificial structures as mostly the buildings of the city, which were a result of the enterprise which is based on hustling and hoarding the people together in a smallest possible space, from where they are made to lose sight of the possible and mostly think about escape by flying away in the bigger aircrafts was in sharp contrast to what was natural around it to see.

It however failed to demean the latter which was beautiful, immense and vivid. Rajesh recalled how different this view seemed to him when he looked at it while returning early on some days from his office during summer, when the sun was on his back and the glaring light of it illuminated the buildings of the city.

He took a deep breath after these thoughts and passed the short distance walking with his back to the city and the sun now. The well-pitched road now was covered by tall pine trees

on both the sides and there were no houses around.

His brisk steps and well-exercised slim body defied his middle age betrayed by his graying hair.

The cool shade in this area and the sense of being alone attracted people to it from a city which offered very few open public spaces and privacy in them. Young couples could be seen sitting close to each other on the side of the road while their automobile was parked next to them.

But some automobiles had no couples near them and it appeared as if they have gone deeper into the woods, to explore the things.

More recently, to his dismay, he saw a few women with revealing dresses and an over done make-up, loitering around in that area and staring or smiling at the alone man like him passing.

He thought they were possibly the prostitutes and took a particular care to not return their smiles. After all, the ring road was just a short distance away, from where the city, with all its absurdities, begun.

The road to his village further led to a very famous temple, which was visited by a large number of people every day. So there was a steady traffic on it during the day hours.

Before reaching the Kirtipur University area, Rajesh saw the newly constructed Buddhist monastery which had a tall standing statue of Buddha with a raised right hand and its index finger in front of it.

It was contrary to the image he had of Buddha in his mind. The one he remembered was sitting calmly and meditating with closed eyes.

He recalled that the Kirtipur University was closed for the past fortnight as the local people were demanding the compensation for the land which the government took over from them almost four decades back, to establish the university there. They have already been compensated then.

They have however now realized that the cost of the land has grown significantly over the years and they wanted to be compensated at the current rate.

He crossed the bridge at Balkhu on reaching the ring road. The stinking thick black liquid barely moving below in the Bagmati River made him hold his breath for a moment. He recalled that in his childhood days during summer he came to this river to swim or to fish with his friends. It was difficult to imagine now that this river ever had fish in it.

He shortly approached Kalimati, the area from where the tall buildings on either side of the road announced that the main city has begun.

He stopped in front of an old, not-so-tall building and called out for someone he knew. Actually it was his friend who was a keeper of the grocery shop in the ground floor of the house. Rajesh earlier occasionally purchased some goods from him while returning home.

But the shop keeper had stopped to operate since last autumn after the festivals. He said a fortune-teller has told him that he

was running through a bad time and should stop running his shop.

Or so he told his wife, who insisted on keep on running the shop. His friend possibly wanted to keep away from a shop which was very cold during the winter, as the tall buildings on the other side prevented any sun to reach it. He had hinted it to Rajesh a few times that with years passed shop-running has become an increasingly competitive and tedious job, mainly due to the competitors who were migrants into the city.

He was simply unwilling to work as harder and longer as the migrant shopkeepers next to him.

He just wanted to pass the winter playing Ludo or chess with his friends on the pavement in the adjoining street which was warm due to the sun it received all the day. Besides he liked staring or passing comments at the passing women-Rajesh guessed, which was not possible from his shop.

His wife peeped out of the wooden window on hearing him calling. She informed Rajesh that his friend was away to purchase vegetables from the nearby Kalimati wholesale market. She recognized him and invited him to come upstairs and have a cup of tea while her two young children too started looking at him from another window.

She threw, while Rajesh hesitated, the key of the lock of the door next to the closed shutters of the shop which led to the stairs leading to upper three floors. Each floor of the house had a low ceiling as it was an old built house and had two rooms, a small kitchen and bathroom.

The key was tied to a long cord whose one end always remained with the thrower. Rajesh was expected to open the door with the key and close it behind him while his friend's wife pulled back the cord tied to key from the third-storey window, out of which she was almost shouting to be heard over the roar of the vehicles plying the road next to the pavement.

Rajesh shouted back declining the invitation after thinking for a while and instead asked when the shop would open.

She told that the fortune-teller has asked her husband to return to him after six months with his birth chart to let him see when the auspicious time would commence for him.

Rajesh, on hearing it, gave an ironical laugh which collected his pointed upper lip on the front, making his pointed face look more so, revealing the gap in his front teeth, and the unevenly arranged lower ones, which were black towards the bottom due to the tobacco he chewed. Under his small forehead and thick graying curly hairs his smile made him look wicked.

There also was some defect with his eyes as they never appeared to look at the same thing at any time, though ever shifting they were. The wife of the shopkeeper looked confused finding him laughing and asked him to visit later if he wanted to meet her husband, while she left the window.

Rajesh knew that the couple could easily afford closing down the shop altogether by giving it on hire and increasing the rent of the tenants, who were migrants families mostly, who occupied most of the rooms of the house.

He wondered if his friend would arrange the fortune-teller to

advise him to keep his shop closed during the summer too, as it was not cool either at the shop in summer when the sun directly came over head and the tall buildings on the other side provided no protection. But then there was his wife, who wanted to keep him engaged, however unproductively though—he thought.

He walked on and avoided with difficulty on the way a shop-keeper who had come out of his shop and standing on the pavement he was trying to attract customers by shouting about his goods and pointing towards his shop. His shop was very narrow and dark due to load shedding beyond the goods which were spread outside occupying almost half of the space of the pavement in front of it. His efforts to speak in Nepali betrayed that he was from India. His neighboring local shopkeepers quietly looked on from inside their dark shops.

On reaching his office after walking all the way through Teku and Thapthali he found that the new peon was already serving the morning tea.

Rajesh too received his cup and said to the peon, ‘I may have other vices but I never drink alcohol or had relationship with any other woman except my wife.’

It was loud enough for everybody in the office to hear. But nobody even smiled on it. The other people working in the office knew it was his way to start a conversation which nobody wanted so early in the office.

Because almost every opening of talks deteriorated into discussing politics into which everybody freely expressed his opinions irrespective of the hierarchy in the office. It always

culminated in loud arguments and caused consequent resentment and sulking.

It stopped only when the manager had to come out of his cabin to silence them. The Indian-Bengali manager had given such liberty that all his staff were almost on an equal footing with one another while he held all the power.

The young new peon was already a college graduate and wanted to join a government job to make a career. It was only for the time being that he was a peon in this office - he has told everybody.

Also that he had no intentions of staying here longer even if he got a promotion on account of him being a graduate-which nobody in the office was except the manager.

This saved him a lot of unnecessary pushing and shoving by the senior staff, to which he would have been inevitably been subjected to otherwise, for being the lowest in the hierarchy of the office.

The peon also often said that his final aim always was to write using the red-coloured ink in a government office on papers. Only the government clerks or higher staff used red ink while putting a comment on an application or filling up the ledgers and papers. Red ink was the symbol of the power of a bureaucrat, which has attracted the young graduate man from a village to strive for the job. While working as a peon in a trading company he was working hard to pass the civil service examinations - everybody knew.

The peon just ignored his litany about his vice and virtues. The

telephone rang and Rajesh lifted it asking the peon in Nepali to bring him a glass of water before he started using his English to receive the call. The other staff smiled at the way he shifted from Nepali to English.

There were other jobs in the office needing his attention, like filing the papers or writing address on envelopes meant to be sent away through the peon.

Rajesh finished his tea and took out a pouch of tobacco from his pocket to fill the lower lip before he started to deal with the work in front.

It was already lunch time when he finished his pending work, receiving calls continuously in between and making the other staff smile at the English he used.

Rajesh also had kept the young peon busy in the meanwhile, by asking for a glass of water often, as he washed his mouth every time he refreshed the supply of tobacco.

The peon sat in front of Rajesh on the sofa meant for the visitors whenever he became free. He waited for the call there. The sofas were separated from the chair of Rajesh by his counter-cum-desk.

In between there was a small space for the traffic of the people using the toilet which was situated next to reception. The kitchen was next to the toilet.

The peon had recently picked up the habit of rubbing the nails of his fingers of both of his hands. He did it most of the time sitting in front of Rajesh.

A spiritual Yoga master who was quite popular nowadays for promoting Yoga and also remains in headlines for making a statement about politics, who also blinked one of his eyes whenever he spoke, had told his followers that this exercise of rubbing nails of hands will arrest the receding hairline.

Not only that, some people believed, stretching his teaching a little further, that it could actually treat the baldness. And you found the idle people rubbing their nails everywhere you went.

The peon expected that Rajesh would deal with him with more consideration for he himself occupied the peon's position before he joined in this office.

However, Rajesh felt that he needed to remind the peon his position often, which he had outgrown. The peon sulked, especially when Rajesh made him move from the sofa to bring him yet another glass of water.

.....

Rajesh remembered that he had a special job to do today which was actually assigned to him by his mother this morning as he was about to leave home.

His mother has survived the death of his father by more than a decade now. Earlier she worked at the government school in their village in a cleaner's position. Recently she had retired with a pension.

The widowhood she took up very easily and apart from an occasional reference to his father there was not much in her manners to suggest that she missed his father too much. She nowadays practiced Yoga regularly to keep herself fit.

She never forgot to color her hair and wear her false teeth for an occasion like when they had a visitor at home or when she went away to visit some one. Once she declined to meet a visitor when her false teeth could not be found.

These habits of his mother Rajesh found very charming. She almost totally controlled their joint family and was considered, by the people at his village, to be a witty and clever woman.

Rajesh and his brother's family had two daughters each until very recently. They all lived as a joint family along with his mother in the inherited ancestral house.

The brothers, pushed by their mother, managed to give a facelift to the house by giving it a plaster of cement on the walls outside. Then they give a paint of bright blue color to the plaster to render the house looking fresh among the other houses in the neighborhood which continued to display the discolored, weather-beaten naked bricks held together by mud in their walls which were full of the garlands of chilies or bundles of garlic.

It was a symbol that Rajesh and his brother were not idle or indifferent to their property-as per their mother.

Rajesh was already looking for suitable grooms to marry his daughters off in the near future. He though had discovered that it was not easy and would prove a great burden on his time and the little money he had saved.

The available grooms just literate enough to have been recruited in the army or police in the lower ranks too expected to receive some dowry out of their marriage, not to mention

the ones with a college education and a government or corporate job, who often expected a dowry of a house or a car.

Rajesh did not want to marry off his daughter to a driver or a peasant in one of his neighboring villages.

The wife of his brother had given birth to a son recently to the great delight of his mother. She was happy that they now had a boy who will take ahead the name of the family after the girls were married off - she told.

His mother grew more ambitious about her newly born grandson with each passing day.

On the eleventh day of his birth their family priest gave the newly born a name. It was a few weeks later than that ceremony that the dried part of his navel dropped.

The dropped navel was supposed to be buried under the ground near their house. However, today morning his mother gave it to Rajesh packed in a paper, before she asked him to take it to his cousin.

His cousin worked as a gardener at the Prime Minister's residence at Baluwatar. His mother wanted that the dropped navel of her grandson should be buried with in the premises of the PM's residence instead of any place near their home.

He thought lightly of it in the beginning and laughed when his mother explained him the matter in whispers. She said she wanted her grandson to become the Prime inister of the country one day.

This expression of ambition on her part, to symbolically and

secretly put her newly-born grandson as a possible candidate to occupy the PM's residence in the future; if the act of the burial of his recently dropped navel there made him somehow likely to become one; it was something widely believed to work in the society, appeared a funny idea to Rajesh.

But his mother increasingly whispered in a more subdued manner and tried to look more conspiratorial to convince him that she was serious.

He did not have the courage to disobey her. Rajesh stopped laughing a laugh which left him looking so mischievous and whispered back to his mother that he would do as she has told.

He called his cousin over his mobile. He replied by chanting 'Govinda... Govinda...' before he briefly sang a religious song and made the familiar sound of chewing his tongue. It was how he received a mobile call recently.

He recalled that his cousin had taken up a new religious cult nowadays and uttered 'Govinda.... Govinda...', before he hummed the song before he resumed making sounds as if he was chewing his tongue. He did so even in between the conversation he had with people.

His habit of making the tongue chewing sounds was there since his childhood, as he could not get rid of it. But his other wonts of making chants and singing songs changed depending on the cult he followed lately. He was a few years younger to Rajesh.

Rajesh told his cousin that he wanted to meet him today itself and there was an urgent matter to discuss.

His cousin asked him to reach the canteen near the Baluwatar

bus stand by four pm, before he uttered ‘Govinda... Govinda...’ and hummed the music.

Rajesh took the permission of his manager and left the office at lunchtime. He went walking towards Baluwatar, thinking that he must not linger long there talking to his cousin, though he will certainly force him to have a cup of tea and some snacks.

He did not want to get late to return home, as it became dark by six pm in winter.

As soon he reached the Old Baneshwor area he saw a crowd of men and women running towards him. Some of the women had their children tied on their back.

They all had a bundle in their hands of plastic sheet, wrapping the goods they were selling on the footpath. They all were shouting to alarm the fellow vendors on the way to run away.

Rajesh stood on a side to let them pass. The metro policemen in their Khaki dress with a long bamboo stick in their hands were chasing those footpath vendors.

He saw a white, open truck of metro police creeping on the road nearby with a few apprehended footpath vendors sitting on their bundles on its rear. They were guarded by a few cops on the truck. Some of the apprehended women vendors were coolly smoking in a Nepalese way with the cigarette almost hidden between their palms.

Rajesh also noticed an Indian vendor in the truck with a tray of watermelon and pineapple neatly cut into small pieces. The tray of fruit pieces was on his lap and his other hand was holding the stand of the tray which was made of thin bamboo

sticks and was narrow in the middle.

Rajesh knew that they all would be released after they paid a small bribe to the cops, a short distance away from this area and will return within hours to resume their trade on the pavement meant for the pedestrians.

On several instances the authorities assigned an area for these people to ply their trade, but they always returned to the area where the traffic of the people was, running the risk of occasionally being chased away or being apprehended.

And nowadays you also came across a Chinese street vendor too, a man or a woman, who sold mostly expensive electronic goods by bargaining its price by clicking his or her price on a calculator before handing over the calculator to the customer to click his price.

Every time the calculator changed hands there were shouts of bewilderment and disagreement from the receiver. This business created a queer scene as a curious crowd gathered near to hear the alien, screeching sounds the Chinese made. The Chinese vendors came here as tourists one came to know, with genuine Chinese goods, to also make some money besides seeing the place; and looked angry if a customer did not buy their goods after bargaining the cost.

The other vendors sold a variety of goods ranging from emergency torches to foot wears, made locally or imported from India or China.

A few sold wristwatches filled in a bucket full of water. It was to prove that they were waterproof. The prices of those

vendors were less than half of what one found in a proper shop. Therefore they remained in business.

Rajesh walked on and reached the canteen near Baluwatar bus stop, next to the PM's residence, where he found his cousin waiting for him.

He was greeted with the chant of 'Goninda....Govinda...' by his cousin, and the following humming and the sound of tongue chewing.

Soon they hurriedly exchanged the news about their families between the sips of tea they had in the canteen, along with a Selroti and a Samosa.

Rajesh then told in whispers the real purpose of his visit to his cousin. On hearing it his cousin looked startled and forgot for a moment chewing his tongue and making his chant.

Before he could say something Rajesh handed over to him the paper in which the dropped navel of his nephew was packed.

His cousin, though he still looked bewildered, took it without saying anything and put it in his pocket. From his expression he later displayed that the job will be done. After all it was a family matter.

Then his cousin talked about the new PM, who, he said, came to the garden on holidays and inquired about the flowers. He also mentioned that the new PM had taken an interest in the religious cult he was following. He also asserted that his intention was to finally convert the PM, who, otherwise, was reticent in public about his religious orientation in the newly secular declared nation, and belonged to a communist party.

Seeing that Rajesh was not impressed with this news, his cousin informed him that his brother, who had married an American woman and became a US citizen, was coming to visit him next month, with his wife.

Rajesh received the news unenthusiastically. He had met the couple when they came here five years before, soon after their marriage. His cousin was barely into his thirties, while his wife had already crossed fifty.

However, she had done her best to gloss over the wrinkles on her face with a heavy make-up when they came to visit his mother at his village, hiring a taxi instead of taking a bus.

Rajesh's mother was the eldest surviving member of their clan so she was often visited by the newly married members of it.

The couple came from the five-star hotel they stayed in in Kathmandu. The American wife of his cousin said she liked her short and overweight husband because he looked like a Mexican, when Rajesh engaged her in a conversation with his English.

She, though a little taller and slimmer than his cousin and fairer and with her golden colored hair, was contrary to what one might have thought of an American wife of a Nepalese young man.

She was long past her childbearing age and was wealthy due to the money she received from her divorces, but had no children from her previous marriages.

The couple remained a matter of ridicule for the villagers for a long time after they left. His cousin was a disappointment to

his family for he was sent to the USA for higher education after taking loans, by his parents; in the hope that he will make a career to support them.

He neither completed the studies nor had any stable income ever to pay back the loans of his parents. Just before his visa was about to expire, he found this woman to marry and become a US citizen.

He was as idle as ever in the USA, living off the money of his decrepit and equally idle wife-Rajesh thought with qualms, before he consciously changed the subject.

On parting his cousin uttered 'Govinda... Govinda' again. Rajesh proceeded towards the Lazimpat and Newroad area, as today his route to return home was a little different. He was worried if he could catch the bus at Kalimati as it was already getting dark.

(FROM THE UNDERCLASS LOVER)

The Terminated Abortion

When his wife Pragya gave birth to a second daughter within two years of their marriage Sohan and Pragya became worried.

They knew that Sohan's parents wanted a grand son. Only a grand son opens the gates of heaven for them once they die—they said, and will continue the name of their family.

The latter a grand daughter could not do, as she had to take up the name of the family she is married-off into. No one could confirm however, about opening of the gates of heaven, on account of the birth of a boy in a family, for his departed grand-parents.

These days some of the women retain the family name of their parents as well, along with that of their husband's, after their marriage. They typically have two

second names after their first, like Sumita 'Pradhan' 'Manandhar', or Rasika 'Joshi' 'Adhikari', or Mira 'Pandey' 'Tripathi'.

It happens more often if the marriage is not arranged and instead is a 'love-marriage' – where the boy and the girl themselves select their life partner, with or without the approval of their parents.

Such marriages are noticeable and become a matter of discussion among the people, as they may cross the limits of caste or even community, at times, and are considered an act of rebellion against the practices in the society. More so if they occur in a small town like the one Sohan lived in.

Obviously, they may not entail a ritual donation of a 'kanya' (a virgin girl) as in an arranged marriage, to a groom, selected after gathering enough information about him second-hand; along with a dowry.

Parents painstakingly collect dowry to marry-off their daughter to a decent man who is educated, employed, and pliant enough to submit to the wishes of his elders in the family, to accept an arranged marriage.

At times they do so begrudgingly because they have to make a sacrifice of giving up many of their comforts and hobbies to save money for an attractive dowry for their daughter all their lives.

Someone with a son instead of a daughter is free of it. To find a suitable match for a marriage is an industry which employs many people, and sustains a few newspapers too, those that publish thousands of such advertisements in a special supplement every week-end. Those newspapers and jobs could disappear if most of the people here went for a 'love-marriage'.

As if the element of 'love' remains absent in an arranged marriage and choosing one's mate, as in a 'love-marriage' is a guarantee of an everlasting love in a marriage.

Some couples elope at times in a love-marriage, saving everybody in the society the rituals of kanya-donation, to later return to the family of the boy, where they are generally accepted back with a little remorse. But in some societies both the elopers are killed for dishonoring the name of their families if they belong to different religion or tribes.

The newspapers, including the ones that survive on arranging marriages, term such murders as “honor-killing”, in which often no one is convicted, for the lack of a witness or evidence.

The women having two family names after their first name are considered modern and emancipated. Yet, there are people, not fully convinced of this type of women’s-lib, expressed in their double second-names, like Sohan’s parents, want to have at least one grandson to continue their family’s name after them.

When everybody in the family dropped hints to Pragya in this regard and asked her to bear one more child, Sohan tried to protest, at times. Pragya always restrained her husband saying that this is how the society was. She was amazed to find that the women in the society were the most concerned or critical of her for not mothering a son.

So, within a few years after the birth of her second daughter, Pragya was pregnant again. Though she looked emaciated and fatigued due to the frequent pregnancies and the stress of child-rearing, she was unable to resist the pressure of her in-laws, and other elderly relations.

Now, since she was pregnant again, the pressure on Pragya was immense to bear a son. To release it she used to scold her two daughters, who have started to go to the school by now, for being unlucky to her, and asserted that this time it finally would be a son – who would bring her luck. Her elder daughter ignored her arguments as she had begun to understand the matters a little but her younger daughter appeared more concerned for her mother’s well-being.

Pragya was properly, ritually-donated by her parents to her husband with an adequate dowry, through an arranged marriage. She thought she would live happily ever-after, as Sohan worked as a clerk in a department of the government, as it was a job for life, with a pension at the end of it. Besides Sohan’s parents he had a brother who was more than a decade younger to him. It was a small family to manage for Pragya.

Pragya was expected to fit into the role of a traditional housewife for life, never mind the university degree she had earned. In most cases such degrees for women were an additional qualification to get married-off into a putative and well-to-do family, like a good dowry. Joining the workforce to earn a living was still considered not very reputable for a married woman.

After giving birth to two daughters things turned out very differently than Pragya had expected.

She was very worried if it was once again a daughter developing in her womb, as was every one else in the family.

Sohan found out that in the neighbouring town on the other side of the border – which was next to the Pragya's parents' village – a private hospital offered a service which detected the sex of a child not yet born through the 'video X-ray'. Abortion service was also available there which was still illegal on this side of the border in Nepal.

Also, no questions were asked there about the legitimacy of the pregnancy which was being aborted. So, most of the unwanted pregnancies were terminated there. If a couple from Nepal were seen at that hospital everyone knew that they are there for an abortion.

In fact Sohan has read in the newspapers that most of the women in jails of Nepal were convicted of receiving an abortion and were mostly from poor families, as if the affluent people never had unwanted pregnancies.

Not a single man was ever reported to have been booked for causing a pregnancy which needed a termination. Neither a doctor, who performed it, was ever apprehended. It appeared if becoming pregnant was the sole mistake of a woman from a poor family in this country.

Some people in Sohan's town offered abortion services clandestinely. They were called *Sudeni* and were not well-trained however and often landed their patients into problems.

Sohan remembered it well that his neighbour's young wife died a few years ago soon after receiving an abortion during her third pregnancy from a *Sudeni* – leaving her two young daughters motherless.

That incident attracted the attention of the authorities as well. Somehow, Sohan's neighbour managed to avoid any serious inquest. People said that it did cost him dearly, to bribe the police and the health department officials, and rendered him a destitute.

The loss of his wife was too much for him to bear, and he could never get on

with his life afterwards. He even declined a few proposals he received for his second marriage.

Soon he and his daughters left the town with very little money left with them. These days one hears that his daughters have turned to prostitution while he went insane and found a refuge in a mental asylum in the capital.

Sohan was worried if he was again going to have a daughter. On the insistence of his father finally he decided that they should find out the sex of the baby beforehand, even if they would decide about the abortion later.

He took Pragya to the hospital in the bordering Indian town. The doctor, after the 'video X-ray', confirmed that it was once again a girl, and, if at all, Pragya would have to undertake the abortion immediately, as later the risk would increase for her.

Sohan and Pragya felt very dejected at this news. They talked about how disappointed Sohan's parents would feel on this news. They decided that they should abort the foetus. Sohan asked the doctor to admit Pragya in the hospital for terminating her pregnancy the next day, before he went alone to the hotel where they were staying in.

During the night the thoughts of his neighbour's wife, who had died after receiving the abortion, came to Sohan repeatedly.

He loved his wife very much, and now became worried for her, in case if the abortion went wrong. After all, she was physically weak due to the frequent pregnancies and the emotional burden of bearing two girls. An abortion could prove dangerous for her.

He could not sleep the whole night. By the next morning he had made his decision. He went early to the hospital and told the doctors that his wife will not undergo the abortion.

The doctor and the other staff at the hospital were surprised and tried to convince him to let the abortion take place, as earlier planned. They even agreed to reduce the fees. They reminded him that if he came later, for the abortion, it would be late and will be more expensive and risky.

Sohan remained adamant on his decision, however; overruling the protests of a

confused Pragya. He was very angry with his parents for keeping him under pressure to father a son which had endangered the life of his wife now.

They returned home in a rejected mood. Sohan's parents were totally unhappy at the turn of events. They scolded Sohan for not allowing the abortion to take place.

Sohan was not in a mood of reconciliation with his parents on this matter anymore. He told them that his wife would not risk undergoing an abortion, even if it was a third daughter.

He also told them that, she would not bear a child anymore. Also, if they were so interested in having a grandson, they could have their second son married. Maybe, his wife will give them their grandson.

His younger brother had grown up by now and had joined the army as a soldier recently.

Sohan remained indifferent when his parents told him that people marry many times in the society, if they do not have a son. He thought himself a modern man, and was happy with his daughters. He wondered why he remained so much under pressure to have a son, earlier, from his parents or other relations.

His parents stopped persuading him anymore to get his wife receive the abortion. They instead started accusing Sohan's wife of bewitching their son, and for taking him away from their control. They often ended by blaming their Karma for all these developments.

The days passed slowly. No one now talked about the pregnancy of Pragya in the family anymore. The undercurrents of the disagreement in the family were palpable however, even to the casual visitors.

Sohan's parents discussed in length the issue of their expected third granddaughter with almost everyone, at the slightest provocation. They lamented if they would be denied the entry into the heaven after their death, if they did not see the face of a grandson in their lives.

Some visitors empathized with Sohan's parents, while others privately congratulated Sohan and his wife for sticking to their resolution. Every day was an emotional high and low for everyone in the family.

Pragya lost her cool at times, as her inwardly festering hysteria broke. She too cursed her karma for her plight. At times, in presence of her parents-in-law, she needlessly beat her daughters – as if they were guilty for being born as girls – and then wept alone in repentance. She wanted to shift their attention away from her somehow.

In her heart, however, she was grateful to Sohan, for supporting her, and did not care much about the rest.

Secretly, she and Sohan had made plans to go to a distant city, and build their lives separately, after the birth of their third girl.

Finally she had the labour pain and was taken to the health-post of the town where a trained nurse delivered the babies. The nurse was an expert and had a record of delivering upside down or obliquely placed babies successfully.

Pragya's delivery occurred without any complication however. Though there was a surprise for everyone: She delivered a boy.

Sohan's father was exhilarated by this news. He asked one of his neighbours, the one who kept a double-barrelled gun, to fire his gun into the air for five times, to celebrate the occasion – assuring him that he will pay for the cartridges later.

Pragya suddenly became a respectable lady for everyone, for delivering a son. Her daughters were surprised at the reception their brother received on his arrival.

Sohan, however, was shocked at the turn of events. He was dismayed to recall that they had nearly aborted the son his wife has now delivered; about which everyone felt so proud in his family.

He guessed that, in that private hospital, on the other side of the border, probably most of the pregnancies got terminated, to make the money.

Since abortion was illegal here, no one could complain about it later. He thanked god that, even unknowingly, he made the correct decision and saved his son.

(From DELHI-RETURN)