

All shook up

It is a given in our times that what was breaking news just hours ago rapidly disintegrates into something as stale as leftovers in the fridge after a long night's loadshedding. So why should I even toy with the idea of penning a piece based on the big quake ten days ago, is beyond me. Do I want to commit literary harakiri in full public view, sheepishly warming up the sorry looking leftovers because I cannot rustle up a gourmet meal, so to speak? We all know how much this tremor figured on the Richter scale, its epicentre, the collateral damage, our singular lack of disaster preparedness, the possibility of more to come...

The facts and figures that every other man and woman around me can rattle off at a moment's notice is as awesome as the tectonic upheaval that started it all. Everybody has an incisive, analytical, know – it-all take on earthquakes. Many, in fact, sound like they have a portable seismograph, one as handy as a swiss army knife, which they can fish out of their pockets and handbags the minute things rattle around them. I can imagine people crouched under tables and door jambs, or sprinting on a mad dash out to the open, intently peering into the small lit-up screens of their accurate, digital, seismographs and figuring out their chances of escaping unscratched.

It would be futile on my part, therefore, to even try matching up to the average person's empirical knowledge about this literally unsettling natural phenomenon. But then, all that matters to me is what lies beyond the whys and wherefores – for I suddenly discover a treasure chest of little stories floating in the air around me, little anecdotes that people have been telling me about what they were in the middle of when that terrific shudder caught them unawares, what their thoughts were as they were fleeing to safety, how their whole lives flashed before their eyes and how they continue to cope with the fear that this was only the prologue to bigger things to come.

In moments of peril, it is our instinct to remember the people we love and may forever be prevented from seeing. This is a very real fear and people as strikingly different as an Eskimo and a Zulu tribesman will identify with it, thus understanding each other with perfect clarity should they ever be thrown in together. For me, personally, a tremor somehow always comes with a sudden and urgent remembrance of my geography teacher in my staid convent school. For it was she alone who initiated me, and the rest of my classmates, with the knowledge that this good earth was not so much grass and rose bushes with some nice, poetic, shady trees thrown in. Deep within the earth, there was a zillion centigrade hell hole with liquid fire pushing its way out as volcanoes. As we sleepily tried making sense of it all, sticking chewing gum under our desks, she droned on about tectonic plates, fault lines, their irresponsible restlessness, and how the Himalayas was once the Tethys sea and India – two separate landmasses. Madam geography, with her kindly, maternal tone and crisp, cotton saris, made us painfully aware that the ground beneath our feet was as untrustworthy as the boys who hung around hopefully outside the schoolgates every evening. To be forewarned is to be forearmed and my teacher so effectively put the fear of the underground into me that I have been like a coiled spring ever since, prepared to flee at short notice.

In between these long years of dreaded anticipation, I have come to know, along with everybody in this corner of the world, that the word underground has another connotation, one equally sinister, one that we could perhaps have prevented, but history had other plans. We talk about that underground in hushed tones, too, and how it unleashes its savagery on us is sudden, and as arbitrary as the other underground.

Over the last few days – as I have been saying, I am consumed by this intense curiosity about what friends, relatives, colleagues, acquaintances and neighbours were doing when the window panes began to rattle. Their revelations tell me so much about human nature, and proves without doubt that though we belong to the family of man, we are also so different. I was talking to my friend on the phone, a college lecturer said an acquaintance. She was complaining in general about her husband, starting with his unwillingness to go *puja* shopping. She then started taking my recipe for pigeon meat curry with sesame seeds. Panic, what panic? We went on talking right through. It was only forty seconds, right. I just repeated the list of ingredients, problem in case she was distracted.

The quake? My journo friend grinned, "I thought it was all my fault."

"Come off it," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "You sure have an inflated sense of your own importance".

"You got me wrong there, lady." He said in an injured tone. "I always have a peg or two lateish in the night, after work. So when things started spinning around, I was at first sure I was plastered. So it didn't bother me in the least. Then I realised I hadn't taken the tiniest sip the whole evening. Even so, I wondered if it was the previous night's peg, delayed effect and all that. It was only when I saw people running that I finally got it. The problem was outside, not inside me.

"Sorry, the clothes are not ready," said my tailor. Normally, I would be annoyed, disappointed, inconvenienced. But my new, all consuming interest makes non-delivery of clothes irrelevant. So what was Master Tailor *Saheb* doing when the earth was all shook up, Elvis fashion?

"I was playing chess." I gaped at him with new found respect. From a humble man who took measurements all day, slaved away at his Singer machine, bit thread with his teeth and was bullied by his all-female clientele, here emerges the nobleman of Awadh, straight out of Ray's *Shatranj Ki Khiladi*, moving his queen and knight even as all hell broke loose.

“Didn’t the chess pieces fall off?” I asked “No, I did. Fell right off the chair. Hurt my hip. The chess pieces have magnets – they stick to the board”.

So there you are – two new revelations - a chess playing tailor and a chess set specially made for playing during earthquakes.

Next is my elderly family friend. “I’m seriously thinking of making a will. I’ve put it off for years. Your aunty and I were figuring we’d give the property to the son who looks after us right till the end, you know. Then, with everything rattling and shaking, I figured we may never get a chance to test our children’s loyalty. So might as well carve it all up between them while we are still on the earth’s surface and have our my wits about us.”

“No going to the movies for some days,” announces a friend. “Can’t bear to spend my last moments watching some hideous item song.” “Never go to the mall”, warned another. I was in one during the quake, I had whole racks of baby diapers, breakfast cereal and herbal creams fall on me. But the worst part? Joining the screaming push-turns-to-shove queues for the exits. Pure mayhem.” My neighbour says, “I used to keep a bag by the living room front door – with a flashlight, band-aid, Maggi packets, medicines, water bottle, glucose biscuits, candles, matches, even extra spectacles. That evening, as we were making a mad dash for the door, I was confident the bag would see us through the worst catastrophe. But to our shock and horror, the bag was gone. We are badly shaken. Of course, I mean due to the missing bag, not the quake. We suspect the part-time maid. “We have a new bag now.” “And the maid?” “Oh, we fired her at once. Can’t have her playing with our lives, can we?”

indrani.raimedhi@gmail.com