

Fyataru

Nabarun Bhattacharya

Don't go near the yellow halogen lights if you buy liquor on *black*¹

Be it Irfan or Mandol's, whosoever's country liquor-shack it is, there are days when there is no sense of control in anyone. Say, a drunk policeman in civil dress utters a few "lih, lih" words of nonsense, and the whole lot of drunkards joins him in making weird and barbaric sounds. That guy sleeping peacefully against a pole – now awake – starts abusing the man in front who was making some salty crisps for his pegs. Done, it will then turn into a ruckus. The best policy in these times is that of DS or Director Special. His attaché case has the initials of his name decoratively grafted on the side parts. DS. Black. A fat black toad. Wearing a cheap Terylene shirt. A locket with the photo of the Mahaprabhu² dangling from the half opened shirt. Glimpses of share-market forms in the attaché case. A dotted pen with the name of a foreign liquor brand on it. A filthy comb thick with the fossilized dirt from many heads. A photo of an old woman. Calmose tablets. A metro-rail ticket. And a purchased diary. Bought this year. That night was very sweaty. Noisy too. The policy of DS was just to gulp a pint of liquor in a whisker and leave the place. But that night he was caught by a man, wearing a cheap starched kurta, fair, slim, with dyed hair covering the neck, a long nose, but no teeth.

That guy was Madan. He smiled wide with his toothless gum, then poked DS with his lean fingers and said,

- All these shouting drunkards you see, every one of them is impotent. They will be kicked bad by their wives as they reach home. You know what it's called – partner on, Bengal gone. I hate the Bengalis only for this. Everyone is a puppet of his wife. And the wives, give them a chance and they will flee. DS was worried. His wife had fled too. Eloped with a successful agent of the Peerless (Chit Fund). A girl from Baruipur. DS asked Madan,
- Are you a detective?
- What do you think? The main point is – don't go on the other side, the *fotfoting* monster is there.³ But who cares? The Bengalis didn't. They went that side. And then one after another, a tiger, a croc...today or tomorrow, DS, you'll also be trapped in

that. Madan then took out the dentures from his kurta pocket, bent the liquor bottle over a little, washed them with a few drops and wore them straight away. He glared,

- Don't just think about that. There is a saying: you become more intelligent after your wife flees. Mine got better too. Whatever I said all this while is a complete lie. Just to draw your attention. My plan was to drink a pint of liquor. I don't have money; so, would you?

DS bought it. Madan had more of it.

- You too dying for money, eh? Look at the bastard Mandol, he was in the prison for seven years and now running a liquor shack. No shortage of money. He has his daughter admitted in a posh convent school. But you go there, ask for him, and he'll always put up a sad face.
- Why?
- Suspicion. He has deep suspicion over his wife. Don't just go and tell him these things.
- No, no, not at all.
- Did you watch the Saturday night English film?
- No, why.
- Why would you watch the good stuff? That film was scary. A shoal of flying fish. Catching people by their neck and biting them to death.
- Vampire.
- No, no. Vampires are those, what's that, yes the bats. These are fish. They live in a sunken ship. And sometimes go out in a shoal to kill people.
- Flying fish!
- Yes, may be of the shark kind. Whatever, the film was very scary. Let's go. We need some good air after this. My name is Madan, you know I guess?
- Yes I know.
- How?

- Mandol was calling you, I heard.

Out of the shack now, DS and Madan crossed the dark topsy-turvy field in front. There was a garage close-by. A card game was being played in one of the cars in dim candle-light. Somewhere from the dark a bald guy appeared with a sack hanging from his shoulders full of liquor bottles. There was a scooter waiting.

DS stumbled upon something. Madan said,

- Be careful. The general elections are coming next year. The Congress (Party) will be screwed this time. There will be a “jhalhuri”⁴ government at the Centre. You’ll gain big.
- What do you mean?
- I was studying your forehead while talking. You see that market will be profuse with stuff, bang and boom.
- What are you talking about?
- The share-prices. Buy some random shares now. Of Turbo, Reliance, petrol, Vrindavan Aqua, etc., and see what happens.
- Last time I bought a hundred shares of DCM Toyota.
- It went up till 70-72, no? But it will rocket this time. Don’t let go.
- You seem to read the share market quite well. You buy them?
- What, no no. I don’t have money to buy them. And I don’t need money either. The few more days I live, I want to live as a fyataru.
- What will you live as?
- A fyataru.
- What’s that?
- That’s very funny. See, I just studied your forehead and told you the stuff, but you try a thousand times, you still can’t do that.
- Even if I know, say, I read the Cheiro books⁵ and tell.

- Even then. There is no influence whatsoever of any planet on the fyatarus.
- What are these fyatarus then?
- I don't know exactly what species they are of. But they are very special. Understand? You'll see in History, many great men have devised various plans to build the humans anew. I think all those plans and efforts have ultimately given us the fyatarus.

DS and Madan, fully drunk, slowly walked up to the square of the street. The street was glittered with the yellow light of the halogens. There was no one around, complete silence. A line of dark buses were sleeping on either side of the street. A jerky police van steered past. First of all, buying alcohol on black. And then the sharp yellow halogen light. With the gentle breeze flowing around, DS walked up the metal pole of the yellow halogen. He stood against it, held the briefcase between his legs, and then closed his eyes. Not even half a minute passed. And there was a sound, that too:

Fnyat Fnyat Snai Snai⁶

DS heard that someone was whispering in his ears, fnyat fnyat snai snai, fnyat fnyat snai snai, fnyat fnyat.... Awake, DS saw that the yellow lights were spinning and making a tattered dazzle, there was no Madan around, his body had an odd sensation like the new-found wings on an insect, the pain-kisses of his eloped wife all over the pores, and there was Gagarin's innocent boy-like smile from the other side of the space. Looking up he was startled...

... Flying Madan posted immobile in the sky close to the halogen light. Slowly waving his hands to stay put in one place. The yellow light had created a golden aura on his smiling dentures.

- Madan.
- I said it, didn't I, that there was no question of limit for the fyatarus? Come now. Fly up.
- But how to?

DS tried to fly fast with his attaché case. He sweated.

- No, not like that. Raise your hands up and down.
- Like this?

- Yes, and say...
- What?
- Fnyat fnyat snai snai....fnyat fnyat snai snai...

Madan's starched kurta was making an odd sound against the wind. DS kept saying the words.

Fnyat fnyat snai...fnyat fnyat...DS did not realize initially that he had started to fly. Looking down he found himself floating in the air about a foot high from the ground. He became absent-minded. And he fell over with a thud. Madan shouted at him from above,

- You just flew a little high from the ground and you stopped chanting the mantra, you fucker. Better if you had fallen from more height. Say it again, chant the mantra!

Fnyat fnyat snai snai...fnyay fnyat snai snai...This time DS flew up easy. He came close to Madan and waved his hands like proper wings. An old hairless bat ran twice around them and promptly disappeared. An owl perched somewhere far away from the yellow halogen zone hooted.

- Once you are practised, you don't have to say them aloud. You feel like being pulled down, you say them and you will fly up.
- Ok, that I understand, but how do I get down?
- Are you throwing tantrums now? How do I get down? Once your name is recorded in the fyataru registers, you don't have to think about flying up and down. When you need to land, the corpse will automatically go down.
- Corpse?
- Yea, the same. I mean body, body. Let's go, I can feel the gentle air coming from the Ganga. Let's visit the new bridge there.

DS and Madan went high up. The moon-face came out, tearing the cloud.

- That is the light from the new bridge. Not any average light, from the Phillips Company. Let's go there, let's go.... The houses and roads down started moving. Sometimes the darkness looked box-like – fields, trees. DS fell in love with flying.

- I'm so lucky that I've met you. I'm a fyataru now.
- Yes that you are. See that three-storied building there. We'll land up on its roof.
- Why?
- Will smoke a *biri*. The antennae, you see that, we'll rip the cables apart. Slam and break.
- Why, what's its fault?
- Why do you have to ask so many whats and whys – why bray so much? Just do what I tell you to do.

The people who were watching cable TV in that area suddenly found the picture gone for some unknown reasons. The local cable operator was called up. They climbed up the stairs of the three storied building, lighted the area, and found out that chunks of bricks were used to damage the antennae, the burnt end of a *biri* was lying around and also the foul smell of a piss full of country liquor. They realized, a thief might have climbed up the rainwater hosepipes. The antennae was so heavy, cemented so deep and hard that he couldn't take it out.

- That was your initiation. You got anything?
- Yes, I've got the thing now.
- What have you got?
- The initiation for the fyatarus is breaking and smashing, tearing and slamming, and pissing.
- Bravo! Now you are acting intelligent. I must say, you've become a fyataru on a very auspicious night.
- Why?
- Come with me. You'll see. Fyatarus have a big programme tonight.
- What? There are more fyatarus than we two?
- Yes there are, my dear. Swarms and hives of them. Fyatarus have a programme every night. For instance, today's programme is Floatel.

- Floatel?
- Yes, the new hotel on the breasts of Ganga – where the whore-mems dance, the cash-goons party, sing and dance, and eat shit-expensive food, don't you know that?
- I do know that. I heard the NRI owner of that Floatel would call for a share-buying.
- Again your shares? Forget that. Our job tonight is Operation Floatel, meaning, attack the floating hotel.
- Like those vampire fish?
- No, no. no wounding and killing. Just frightening. Making the place dirty. Rampaging stuff. The fun's there.
- Tell me one thing, the news reports of those ghostly attacks with bricks, stones, and such on the new pleasure resorts at Diamond Harbour...
- Yes, those were also done by the fyatarus. You are turning into a good fyataru. You will make name. You understand things so fast.
- What I don't understand is why I was chosen.
- One needs proper qualifications for that. You go to big offices, the officers don't meet you, make you wait, and you don't just sit peacefully – you curse them in your mind, stick the dirt from your nose to the arm-chair handles, scratch the soft cover of a sofa, say, haven't you done that?
- Yes, I have.
- Damage. Damage whenever you can. This has to be kept in mind. We recruit only those who do that. All those hopeless cases, half-dead, abused, humiliated, we select a few from that lot.
- You now, I have broken many bathroom mirrors, made cracks in the water-basin sinks, wrote dirty words on many office-walls.
- You think we don't know that?

- But, I was such a good boy in my childhood. On every 23rd of January, our street vendor would give us two fry-balls for free. We would eat them and shout out loud together – Netaji, come back.
- I know.
- Father would beat me at random. I grew up. Started doing some cheap business. Got married. And then it happened, what had to happen. That guy, I had thought my best friend, stole my wife...
- Correct, correct...
- Nothing good happened in my life.

D.S started sobbing.

- Aha! DS, don't cry. It makes me feel sad too. I wish there were any chances tonight. Or else, I would have shown you some fun.

- What fun.
- Bedroom scenes. Peeking and seeing. Peeping Tom.
- What!
- Ya, big juicy stuff. On the High Rise Towers. Sometimes on the roof too. In a swimming pool.
- Don't say more. I'm feeling horny.
- Already?
- Why not? Haven't had it for long!
- Whatever, now throw those nasty thoughts out of your mind and look down!

Downward, a brilliant necklace of light could be seen hanging around the neck of darkness. DS felt amazed.

- We'll land straight on the middle of the bridge, got that?
- I heard you couldn't walk there.
- Fyatarus don't care for the fucking laws.

Madan and D.S landed on the bridge, panting. The moon went hiding against the oyster-like cloud. A hazy aura could be seen around. A gush of wind. And everything went haywire.

- Brother Madan, we are fyatarus now, but can we go back to our normal lives again? Say like casting votes, shopping for the day, enjoying bhaifota...⁷
- Why not, you can do everything. But you have to always remember that you are a fyataru. Who wants to know anyway whether you are one?
- Tell me, is there a Congress-CPI (M) division in the fyatarus too?
- Yes there is. There has to be. But the fyataru programmes are always a joint action.
- I'm kinda feeling sleepy.
- Yes, me too.
- Just stay put somehow and sleep will vanish.

Bawal with the police⁸

Their sleep got disturbed by the sound of a motorbike. A big-bodied sergeant. Wearing goggles at night which made him look like a *kimbhut*.⁹ The man said with the bike-engine on,

- Hey you, you, where have you parked your cars? You can't stand here. Sleeping is surely out of question. Move on, move out, not a minute more.
- We haven't come here by car.
- What? You're not allowed to walk the bridge.
- We haven't walked up either. We came flying.
- What? You say flying, ha? Fooling around with me! What do you have in that briefcase? Open that now. Strange.
- DS, buddy, don't open.
- Don't open? Even his father will open it. I'll arrest you people.

The sergeant's hand moved towards his waist to take out the revolver. But nothing could be done as Madan and DS had already started waving their hands, flying high from the grounds. All the gravity and stiffness now gone, the sergeant threw away his goggles and began chanting the name of gods in fear. We could see high up, on the pointed end of the Second Howrah Bridge, Madan and DS were flying round and round holding their hands. Like the brave skydivers fly.

- Let's go. He's been frightened enough. He won't forget that.
- Now where
- What, you forgot? Floatel!

Be a "koi" fish in the shoal¹⁰

From that dark side of Howrah, a sound of "ole! ole!" could be heard.¹¹

- There they are.
- Who?
- All the fyatarus of Howrah. They live in dirty alleys and slums like land snails in a colony. You give them free space and they are like the king – oh that sound, that roar.

Like a wind-cutter at night, a few more war-cries were heard, "Laila o Laila."¹²

- Khidirpore, Ekbalpore, Kantapukur – everyone is coming. Just hear them, and you'll know that they are the most fiery, chaotic lot.

In a whisker, the sky became thick with the fnyat fnyat snai snai sound.

- Can you see that gang of people there, wearing rings on their fingers, with shirt and dhoti, they are the lot of *cheatingbaj*, the tricksters. All from North Calcutta. Though there are a few shop-owners too.

A swarm of flying women wearing nylon-sarees and holding stuff like sweepers' brooms, broken cooking stoves, rotten potato curry in an earthen pot, soup made of the discarded parts of a goat, etc. suddenly flew past DS, making their shrill war-cries. There were a few fat old women too. A flying woman tickled the armpit of the flying DS and giggled wide. As the army went ahead, Madan whispered to DS –

- These are the swarms of whores from Sonagachi, Goranhata Bhallukpara. Remember, never mess with them. And that group on the right, can you see, is that of eunuchs. The more you see the more puzzled you feel. Look at that guy – just three pieces of teeth on the upper gum, and panting like he might die anytime, but still waving the wings – he’s a writer, some shit prose poems he writes. Actually a contractual labour in a court. You’ll get items like that too.
- This looks like an air force to me.
- DS, get ready for the dive.
- What!
- The Floatel is there.

The brilliantly lighted Floatel was heaven for the eyes. In every floor, there were Hong Kong mirrors, the band music from Singapore, the guitar played in the manner of Hawaii Island with rap music, also modern Bengali songs plus “tumi robe nirobe,” and the special tandoori chicken for the night.¹³ The most respected NRIs and the gentry of the city, dancers, smugglers, extortionists, fashion designers, models, politicians, beauticians, company owners, mafia, DCDDs, PA 2 Pimps, pimps of MoU, MPs, MLAs, coaches, gigolos, editors, court-poets, king, queen – everyone placed on their plates the sock-draped tandoori legs, tandoori breast, tandoori stomach, tandoori liver, tandoori seenah, tandoori thighs, fried tandoori nose, tandoori eyes, tandoori hair with rice noodles, tandoori bleeding heart, tandoori nerves, tandoori lips, tandoori armpit, and others and was eating them happily. Just about that time, like a bolt from the blue, some weird stuff started falling from the sky – including human shit, human piss, an entire attaché case (with the alphabets D S grafted on either sides), broken stoves, sweepers’ brooms, rotten potato curry with the weird goat-head soup, discarded toothbrush, exam scripts, the leftover hair collected from the salon, bed pan, etc.

- What do you think DS?
- Beyond my words!
- Did you like that?
- Oh! Madan, it seemed like I had a real fulfilment today.

- No English. It does not fit well everywhere. Say, you've got *siddhilabh* tonight.¹⁴
- Yes, yes, right that. Fnyat fnyat snai snai!

The notey-plant isn't dead yet¹⁵

On the basis of ten eye-witnesses of levitation, the story of Madan, DS or the big fyataru-army was not initially believed in.

Kolkata Police investigated the Floatel attack and located the briefcase and other minute details of DS.

A special army, with the RAF, arrested a sleeping DS at midnight. DS cried loud and prayed to them. But no result. He was sent to the lock-up. On another midnight, the man who was forced into the lock-up room by bending and freeing the iron bars, whispered to sleeping DS,

- Just a little hassle and you forget you are a fyataru.
- Madan, my friend!
- The mantra, you remember that still?
- Yes, fnyat fnyat snai snai.

There was a window in the lock-up room.

----- **Translated by Sourit Bhattacharya**

["Fyataru" was first published in the Bengali magazine *Proma* in 1995 and was later collected in the anthology *Fyatarur Bombachak o Anyanyo*, 2004]

Glossary:

¹ The story, as with many other stories by Nabarun, is replete with barely translatable colloquial Bangla terms, with specific region or class-based meaning and use. These translations are closer in meaning. The phrase “buying liquor on black” stands for buying alcohol illegally.

² Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was born in the 16th century Bengal and drew widespread attention as a religious and social reformer through his songs and philosophy. His followers are known as the Vaishnavites.

³ Used sometimes for a monster in fairytales and children's stories, the word fotfoting appears to be a mix of a foring (grasshopper) and the act of flapping its wings (fotfot). The onomatopoeic sound is noteworthy for the larger context of the story.

⁴ Jhalmuri is puffed rice mixed with various vegetables and spices. It is an everyday Bengali snack.

⁵ William John Warner, also known as Cheiro, was a famous 20th century Irish astrologer. The word Cheiro derives from his excellent work in cheiromancy or palmistry.

⁶ Fnyat Fnyat Snai Snai does not have a literal meaning. It is the flapping sound of bird-wings; here that of a big flying creature.

⁷ Bhaifota is a native Indian cultural event, celebrated amongst others by the Bengalis, where the sisters pray for their brother's safety and well-being.

⁸ Bawal may be roughly translated as fracas or brawl.

⁹ Kimbhut, which again has a fairytale etymology, is a popular expression for ugly monster.

¹⁰ Koi is a kind of fish which can climb the trees and stay out of water for long. It is also known as climbing perches and falls in the group Anabas in South Asia.

¹¹ “Ole Ole” is a very popular Bollywood song from the film, *Ye Dillagi* (1994) where a boy sings about his fancies, madness, and bodily pleasures after seeing a girl.

¹² “Laila o Laila” is also a very popular Bollywood song from the film, *Qurbani* (1980) where a girl sings about her beauty and how all the boys want to desperately meet her alone. Both the songs are stage-songs, and have elements of band music, chorus, cabaret in them.

¹³ “In silence wilt thou be” is a well-known Bengali song by Rabindranath Tagore.

¹⁴ The word “sidhhilabh” has a Hindu mythological-scriptural basis which stands for acquiring wealth and prosperity. Often symbolized with a design, siddhilabh is generally related with

Lord Ganesha or the goddess Laxmi. It also means completion of a task and the subsequent gaining of a particular beneficial knowledge.

¹⁵ This is taken from a common end-of-story line in Bengal which goes, “The notey-plant dies/ and my story ends.”