

Small Town Scenes In A Café In A Developing Country

Table 1- In a fairer world, George Michael Wankhar would not be struggling to provide for his family of four, a wife of eighteen years and their two children, make his Equated Monthly Installments of eleven thousand three hundred and twenty one Rupees for a second car he should not have bought, and pay for the upkeep of a lover who is an unpaid intern in his office, half his age, and pregnant with his child.

Table 2- Mr. Bhattacharya, whose father passed away after a short battle with leukemia and never forgave him for never becoming a doctor orders the same thing every time. A grilled chicken cheese sandwich without the cheese and two cups of cappuccino with eight sugars for each cup.

It wasn't for a lack of trying. On three different occasions, he'd appeared for the Medical College Qualifying examinations and fell short each time. His father, a cardiologist who prided himself on education and the superiority of Brahmins in a town of barley-educated tribals never made peace with the failures and choices of his son.

Table 3- Bawadphang, at 5'11 is taller and more well-built than most in this town, and sprained his ankle the first week of football tryouts. His father played the upper tier of Indian football and represented the country on twenty occasions as a defensive midfielder. A cult hero in this small town, his son's size and height birthed the same lofty sporting expectations.

When he awoke in the morning, Bawadphang had lost another two hundred and seventy seven followers. It was two hundred and thirty the day before. At this rate, his Instagram and a following he had built religiously through hard work, good looks, a style that pushed boundaries and aimed to shock, and an understanding of the ways of social media would amount to nothing.

Table 4- No sooner do they sit down at the biggest table in the café than they start mumbling in passive aggressive tones. The first time he hit her they'd been drinking and smoking weed they'd procured from a dealer in a town in the Himalayan foothills. The second time he hit her they had come back from a funeral of a distant uncle of his and had neither drank nor smoked.

He stopped for a little while when they found out she was pregnant. Three days after she miscarried, the hitting resumed.

Table 5- In New Delhi where they study, Daphi, Grace and Neil who are best friends and whose families socialize in the same circles are regulars at many a Starbucks. In New Delhi, where their respective parents pay for a three-bedroom flat in an upmarket neighbourhood with watchmen who work long and overtime hours, Daphi, Grace and Neil started a blog. Articles that appear on their blog 'The Evils of Materialism' are shared profusely by their friends and followers on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Daphi, whose iPhone 11 Pro, a birthday gift from her well-connected contractor father is the phone of choice for group selfies. Grace's iPhone 8 is too outdated and Neil's One Plus is not an iPhone.

Table 6- Sebastian Auburn eats all of his meals here. When they banned mass gatherings, Sebastian Auburn, a travelling evangelist, had to shut shop. His church of more than a hundred communicate on WhatsApp, and Sebastian Auburn adds fire-and-brimstone commentary to videos of Christians getting persecuted and ridiculed for their beliefs by non-believers and , many of which he records in the café.

Table 7- Kong and Bah started a food delivery business three weeks into the lockdown because Exotic Tribal Travels, a tour operator they run from their living room is shut down for the foreseeable future.

Table 8- Reuben dreams in numbers. It is a skill that people who play the numbers in a local gambling game called Teer teach themselves. Every dream is assigned a number. And the odds can be life-changing. 80-1, 70-1, and 4000-1.

It has been four weeks since he won anything and his angst is most prominent between 3:35 p.m. and 4:45 p.m. when the first and second round numbers are announced respectively.

Table 9- Shiba Laloo is a victim of the system. A system designed for Shiba Laloo and thousands like him to rarely succeed, to barely get their heads above an unfair surface. Shiba Laloo, who speaks three languages and two dialects fluently is the first member of his family to graduate from college. Shiba Laloo, who has four unpaid internships in his Resume, has grades that make most of his applications eligible. Shiba Laloo, who studies hard and runs a 5K every morning in preparation for the State Police Examinations has never seen his name in a list of successful job

applicants. But he sees folks with lesser grades and worse running times make it to a diversity of lists.

Table 1- A multi-level marketing scheme that he had invested most of his savings into has not produced the profits that had been promised in a series of presentations by a group of well-dressed individuals. The calls and return of calls, the messages and return of messages which had been prompt and timely in the beginning, prior to the investment, have now dwindled. Multiple calls not returned and excuses conjured. The fancily dressed presenters and their fancier presentations of confusing pie charts and graphs, pledges and dreams, and quotations by authors of self-help bestsellers had assured George Michael Wankhar a four-and-five-times-fold return on his investment. It is money he shouldn't have borrowed. It is money that should have been left untouched in a Savings account. It is money his wife had preserved for the future and the times of unknown and uncertainty.

Table 2- Dr. Lyngdoh, tribal, diminutive, and head of the Oncology Department at the Nightingale Hospital orders a green tea every time. She and Mr. Bhattacharya met when Mr. Bhattacharya worked photographer and caterer for her elder sister's wedding.

Table 3- Bawadphang's table is a mess. He screams an expletive, much to the bewilderment of all the other tables when he knocks over a strawberry shake. It is a series of phone calls and messages, the next one more animated than the previous.

Table 4- He holds her hand when an order is being read and taken. Strokes her arm when an order is brought to the table.

He blames her for his shortcomings, for dreams that never materialized.

His are the failures that define small towns. Even small towns in the middle of nowhere. The musician who never made it. The lead singer of the cover band at weddings and fetes. The grade-three government office employee who never cracked the most sought-after civil services examinations. The boyfriend who drank and gambled too much.

She loves the idea of him, the idea of trying to change him. Hence the forgiveness after the beating, no matter how harsher, how more violent than the last time it becomes.

Table 5- Daphi, Grace and Neil are louder than other customers. They speak of the need to help their hometown, to end discrimination and sexism. They speak of all the things that make Starbucks a better place for coffee than this café. Of all the things that are so readily and widely available in a metropolitan city like New Delhi. Of the nightlife that does not exist in a small town such as this.

Table 6- Sebastian Auburn who changed his name from John Bread after spending five years in an American prison for fraud moved to Myanmar and discovered love, Buddha, and tea. His name was Tin Tun and he sparkled joy and the kind of optimism that Sebastian Auburn was convinced no longer existed in the West. Tin Tun sold India Darjeeling tea, tee-shirts with quotes of Buddha, Gandhi, Einstein and Stalin, and blowjobs to foreign backpackers and army personnel. Sebastian Auburn bought them for a bargain.

Had it not been for the Rohingya genocide, Sebastian Auburn would have stayed on in Myanmar.

Table 7- This year was supposed to have been the year they finally made a profit. Exotic Tribal Travels, an idea they hatched in a Chinese restaurant seven years ago found adventurous travellers from Israel, Japan, North America, Brazil, Western Europe who sought the untraveled, the different, and the strange. Folks who wanted to experience an India they had no idea existed, an India their embassies and home offices cautioned against venturing into.

Their brochures and website harped on the exotic, front, bold and centre. A trickle for much of the first five years, it was a group of travellers from Osaka, Japan, that put in motion the wheels of change for the profitable and convinced Bah to go full time and quit a less-than-satisfying job as an insurance salesman. The group of seven tipped Kong and Bah two lakh rupees in United States dollars. Three thousand dollars for showing them a part of India they had no idea existed with patience, care, diligence and niceness.

Table 8- It's make or break for Reuben today. He needs any of these numbers for the first round- 07, 09, 11, 22, 23, 54, 55 56, 58, 59. He's bet a hundred rupees on each number. Any of these numbers will give him a neat return of eight thousand rupees. Not a life-changing amount but a-things-are-finally-looking-up amount. And anything ending in 6 for the second round. He's also bet a hundred rupees on each number.

Table 9- Shiba Laloo, whose parents passed away when he was only three and who grew up in an orphanage has never known privilege or good fortune. Rarely, if ever, has he been given the benefit of the doubt.

Today, Shiba Laloo is waiting to hear back from a job application. It is a public sector undertaking for a position that lists all of the skill sets that he has acquired.

Table 1- A grilled chicken sandwich and black coffee, and three folders of documents and worry.

Table 2- Twenty six years and two sons later, Mr. Bhattacharya and Dr. Lyngdoh have their work cut out for them. As the only son of a Hindu father, Mr. Bhattacharya is entitled to his father's property. A property, the sale of which would help pay for the foreign education of both sons. A property, the transfer of which would not be as straightforward because of changes his father made to his will a few months before his death. A nurse who moved in with him after the death of his wife, who cared for him, who now found herself the recipient of a sixty-year old property in a desirable part of town, who now found herself in a legal tussle with Mr. Bhattacharya and Dr. Lyngdoh.

Table 3- In an attempt to be funny, Bawadphang had commented on the account of another social media influencer a one-liner that his followers construed to be rather homophobic.

“But you're not what they are saying you are, Bawadphang.”

“Don't you think I know that?”

“There's only one thing you can do, you know that, right?”

“ I can’t!”

“You need to, Bawadphang, if you want to salvage what’s left of your Instagram.”

“I really cannot, it will kill my father!”

Raplang embraced a crying Bawadphang, kissed him, and would not let go.

Table 4- It is the works. A Beef burger with bacon, mushrooms and cheese. A bruised arm underneath a university hoodie. A Grilled mustard fish with mashed potatoes and vegetables. A chipped tooth underneath a mask. A large latte and a small cappuccino. A black eye underneath sunglasses.

Table 5- They take pictures of the food and coffee and of each other in different poses of deep thinking and hard work.

Hard at work- a selfie is posted on their personal and ‘The Evils of Materialism’ social media accounts.

There is little talk of saving the world. Daphi, Grace and Neil check for likes and comments every thirty and forty seconds.

Table 6- In Thailand, Sebastian Auburn befriended a fellow American who paid for his Big Mac, fries and soda and taught him the ABCs and XYZs of starting and pastoring a church in foreign and easy-to-impress lands.

Table 7- And while their first meeting with the owner of the café did not churn out an agreement, they are hoping that their new proposal of eight percent, which they have researched is better than any of the competition, will sway the owner of the café into changing platforms.

They speak about the importance of promoting local businesses and entrepreneurs.

The owner wants twelve percent and they settle on ten.

Table 8- The first round number is in. Reuben is a mess. It's a 57.

An espresso. And then another.

Reuben is walking around the café much to the disapproval of the owner who is playing the online game Pubg on his mobile, and the other tables.

The second round number is in. It's a 26. Reuben is ecstatic. Things are finally looking up for him.

Table 9- Shiba Laloo prefers tea to coffee.

Shiba Laloo hangs up and takes the remaining sip of his tea with milk. They decided to go with another applicant. The niece of a well-known bureaucrat whose grades should have been a disqualifying factor.