

Right Number

CHINTITO

THE handset almost leaped out of its cradle. So did me from my heaped-up-morning stance of reading the daily papers, which in most cases these days are a tame version of news on private TV channels the night before; the graphic images there are most impacting. So it was not difficult to unwind and reach for the cause of the acoustic nuisance.

'Hello... hello...' said a male voice on the other side. He seemed rather worked up. Possible causes include murder, price rise, road accident, transfer tale, appointments and bank fraud stories in that morning's newspaper; for despite the illustrative descriptions on TV, people still want to reconfirm the gory details of what they saw and heard by seeing them in print the morning after.

The voice coming through the earpiece was unfamiliar and attacking. The frenzied debate whirled in my mind whether to respond or to hang up.

'Hello... hello...what's up man? Why aren't you talking?' crackled the stranger.

'Who is it?' I manage to say.

'You will not know me, but I have to read your column sometimes', said he.

'Have to?!?' I clear my voice to convey normalcy.

HE: 'That's right! Whenever I am at my dentists and I have to wait hours despite an appointment, would you believe, made a week in advance, I see some old Star magazines lying about... Nothing good will come of this country...'

ME: 'But, he could be unexpectedly busy with a patient...' (I could not believe I was continuing this conversation.)

HE: 'I am talking about the old magazines. Have you ever seen a new magazine at a dentists' waiting room', have you?'

ME: 'How often do you visit your dentists?' (By now I was feeling rather relaxed that it was not someone with an amputated part of the anatomy or a colour as an adjective before his name)

HE: 'Every six-seven months.'

ME: 'Perhaps that is why you get to see the old...'

HE: 'Old? Do you know how old? Two years, three years...'

ME: 'They must have been new at some stage.'

HE: 'Yeah! In someone else's house. I think the doctor buys them per kg from Nilkhet. Or maybe picks them up from others dentists.' (He ended that with what sounded like laughter.)

ME: 'Maybe people take away the new magazines and leave the old ones.'

HE: 'There you are, defending a doctor who you don't even know!'

ME: 'But I often write about people I do not know, or have never met.'

HE: 'You also write on current issues...'

ME: 'Not always.' (Unbelievable, I was actually defending myself against a total stranger; must be the early morning.)

HE: 'But this *bishaal* current issue you are avoiding totally? *Byapar kee?*'

ME: 'It's not possible to keep up with... there is so much happening.' (Not having any inkling as to what he was getting at.)

HE: 'But this is big, in case you have not noticed.' He went on attacking.

ME: 'What is big?'

HE: 'A Brigadier, I suppose!'

ME: 'That's entirely your opinion.'

HE: 'Otherwise why should he be exempted from appearing in court?'

ME: 'That's for the court to decide, isn't it? And he will whenever required.'

HE: 'I mean if the full Secretary of the government can be made to appear in person, what's the problem with a person serving in the military?' (By now I was wondering whether this was some sort of a trap. So I said nothing.)

HE again: 'Nothing will come of this country. While there is a global move to demilitarise, to bridge the gap between the civil population and military personnel, here we have a needless move in the court that is likely to create ill feeling in our society.'

ME: 'I told you, it is for the court to decide.'

HE: 'That is why the world over today military coup is looked down upon. Military are now more involved in peace missions, our men have been serving under UN missions with pride and dignity, the entire role has been reversed by an increase in democratic practices.'

ME: 'Our military is also becoming more service oriented.'

HE: 'Right! Our Armed Forces are organising public exhibitions, planting trees, building roads, plugging dams; officers are giving TV interviews. There is the street band party on Eid days and other special occasions. All these are extremely popular moves to bring the military close to the people they serve.'

ME: 'They are close!'

HE: 'Aha! But, it does not seem appropriate to make a military officer appear different from a civil officer in the same case; that too when the military chap is much junior.'

ME: 'There must have been some valid points.'

HE: 'Brother, the offence, if any, is civil, not military. So, why is this talk about a separate military court?'

ME: 'There is such a talk?'

HE: 'You know nothing. You are sleeping.'

ME: 'Actually I was.'

HE: 'I don't know *mashai* whether you have seen on TV that American Army personnel in the Iraqi jail violations had to answer to civil courts. In the UK too... If the Secretary can appear, why not a...?' (This conversation was leading from one thing to another, and it suddenly dawned on me that I should go on a counterattack.)

ME: 'Hey! Where did you get my number? (Click!)

NB. I must get a caller ID system for my telephone.