IT'S NO JOKE

LET me tell you of a real life tragicomic natok-like episode that took place in our home not so long ago...

Twenty year-old Shefali (not her real name) had come to work for us a few months back. She was a bit of a handful from the start, cheeky and challenging, but more high-spirited than anything else, or so we thought

Actually, the one who had to cope with Shefali 24/7 was Roushan, our reliable, responsible housekeeper -- I say 'housekeeper' because for years she has single-handedly kept the household running and secure for the better part of the day when none of us is home.

And to be honest, because Roushan was dealing with the headache of having someone new working in the house, I didn't allow it to become my headache.

She'd come to me now and again with complaints about Shefali's behaviour -- waving, and more perhaps, at neighbours through the window . But Roushan never expressed any really serious misgivings.

Until, that is, she was called home to her village for a family emergency. The morning she left -- in the middle of explaining what household instructions she was leaving with Shefali -- Roushan lowered her voice and told me that she didn't trust the girl with the front door key.

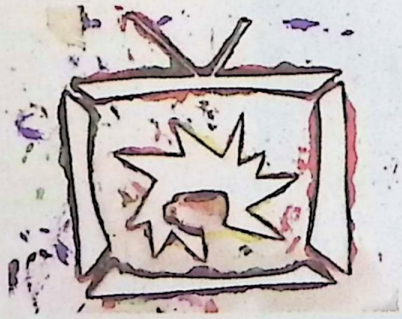
She was leaving her keyless so she wouldn't go wandering or do 'God-knows-what' while we were all out of the house.

The alarm bells should have been ringing. But being in a hurry to get to work myself, I just okayed everything before rushing off.

When I returned late that night, I was met with a blubbing Shefali babbling out some garbled story as I walked in the door.

Hmm. Were my instincts telling me something was wrong?

Shefali's rambling and incoherent story instantly suggested a fairly



healthy dose of guilt on her behalf. My efforts to piece together the scattered elements of her story provided me with the elements of 'front door left wide open', 'unknown boy', and a 'burka'.

Instincts on red alert!

What bizarre chain of events could have occurred in our normally secure and uneventful residence? Well, the guards were certainly not backwards in coming forwards with the soap-opera-like details.

Shefali, apparently inspired by the plot of some tawdry television natok, decided she could smuggle her paramour into our apartment dressed in a burka, leaving the house wide open having been left keyless.

A cunning and breathtakingly audacious plan. Fortunately the trusty guards downstairs were up to the task of foiling it. Perhaps it was the lumbering, all-too manly gait or the hairy toes propelling our lusty hero that gave it away?

So what can be gleaned from this modern urban tale, perhaps that it is not necessarily urban or modern, but it may well have been inspired by a television play, or so many of my colleagues at work seemed to think.

Until now, the impact of television on society had been a subject I've always found 'interesting' -- but in the lazy kind of way that allows you to make sweeping generalisations without thinking too hard.

A colleague happened to mention shortly after the Shefali incident that he was trawling through studies on the subject for a paper he was writing. But he told me mournfully that his paper would be a bit on the thin side, as there was little rigorous research on the subject in this country.

This surprised me. I would have thought the subject offered rich pickings for social and cultural research in Bangladesh -- what with the sudden proliferation of satellite and home-grown television channels pumping a global free-for-all culture-fest into households at every strata of society.

Sociologists have certainly been mining the subject for decades in other parts of the world, while cultural commentators have either been lamenting or celebrating the passing of society-as-we-know-it from almost the first minutes of the first television broadcasts in the West.

But cheap doom-and-gloom prophecies aside, what are the cultural and social costs and benefits of having 101 24-hour channels at the click of a switch in a country with few counterbalancing, non-commercial sources of entertainment, information or education?

And if any sociologists are reading this, please feel free to use my little tale as anecdotal evidence for any number of social studies you care to think of.

Bandicoot