

Uncomfortably Numb

SRABONTI NARMEEN ALI

DHAKA -- a paradoxical entity in itself. In the midst of all the chaos and confusion there is a whole new world of incomprehensible contradictions. Here, in the mainstream metropolis of Bangladesh, one can see both sides of the coin -- the constant mix of rich and poor. We are thrown together in our everyday lives, living side by side like pieces of chocolates in a box -- we share the same space, but there is nothing else that ties us together.

It is fair to say that as the more privileged class, those of us who are not dying of malnutrition and out begging on the streets should be more tolerant of the less fortunate. Unfortunately, constant exposure to certain things leads to habitual tendencies. The more we are exposed to poverty and the underprivileged, the more desensitized we get, which leads to a shameless lack of tolerance on our part.

We forget that the other side has as much a right to share our space as we do. But no, we get frustrated. They get in our way, harass us for money, stare at us funny and walk in front of our fast moving cars without a second thought. And we, in turn, lash out in our irritation.

I saw a crippled, old man while I was stuck in traffic today. He was standing in front of a variety store. His frayed, yellowing 'genji' hung loosely over his rainbow-coloured 'lungi'. He was carrying a broken 'lathi' in one hand. The blackened, grubby fingers of his other hand clasped a steel bowl, half-heartedly filled with coins. A young boy in well-fitted jeans and a black t-shirt came striding out of the store. His bright blue Adidas sneakers shone in the sunlight with each springing step he took. The old man hobbled towards the boy, with new purpose -- determination. He held his bowl out for money. The boy shoved him aside as he hurriedly walked to his car, his keys jingling loudly as he swung them around his index finger, his other hand casually sinking itself into the pocket of his jeans. He never looked back to see the old man losing his balance and tripping on his 'lathi'.

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He had already driven away when the steel bowl crashed to the floor, and the coins clinked and clanked all over the pavement in front of the store. The man struggled to get up while the store owners yelled at him, telling him to move. The insistent ringing of my cell phone distracted me and I looked away. I picked up the call and talked to a friend about our dinner plans for the evening. I remembered the man only when my car started moving forward. By then however, I had other things on my mind, and I didn't bother looking back.

We never look back, that's our problem. We never think twice. In Dhaka, where Nissan Patrols and Range Rovers unmistakably terrorise rickshaws and CNG's, and where four-story houses tower over slums, there is no need to think twice. Poverty is not a novelty for us, as it is for foreigners who come here for the first time, wrinkling their noses at the pungent smells wafting through the air, and raising their eyebrows at the sight of a half crippled child leading a blind man through a busy street. These foreigners, once here long enough, soon learn too. They stop feeling sorry for the beggars who never cease to pound their dirty hands on your car window, staining the glass, or the slew of street urchins who accost you when you walk outside of a store. They become (like us) complacent. As long as these so-called distractions

do not invade our space we need not bother with their problems. Once they do cross that line we teach them to remember their place by using physical force or harsh words, or in most cases, complete denial of their existence.

It was pouring when I was coming back from work. A little girl in a magenta coloured dress with white flowers was walking on the side of the street. In the downpour I could only distinguish a spot of magenta moving at snail speed. Sidling up to my car door she knocked. Her big brown eyes met mine as she leaned her head against my window, her eyelashes dripping with tears and rain. I could see now that her hair was almost blond from the exposure to the sun. Her voice was carried far away by the sound of rain. A loud rumble of thunder cracked through the air, and we both jumped, startled. If I opened my window now I would get drenched. I shook my head at her, as if to say "No, Go Away." She walked away slowly. The thunderstorm slowly ate up the small splash of magenta, until I could no longer see it. My car moved forward, and I didn't bother looking back.