People, Space, Privacy

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During a recent *aborodh* day I was walking among demonstrators near Gulistan taking pictures. At one point, I stepped behind others onto a traffic island to catch a better view of a fiery speaker. As I tiptoed on my heels and raised my camera I nearly lost my balance and had to place my hand on the shoulder of the man in front to regain it.

At the very least, I was expecting this man to turn around and shoot me a rude glare, but he seemed not to notice and kept on watching nonchalantly. I tapped him on his shoulder and said "Sorry Bhaiya". He turned towards me, his face wearing a puzzled expression. Without saying anything to indicate that he understood or accepted my apology, he brushed his shoulder with his hand and resumed watching the speech.

I was puzzled and so watched the behaviour of others in the crowd: what did they do when nudged, pushed, or shoved? I found that most people seemed not to care, accepting it as part of life. Which, indeed, it is.

For if there is one defining essence of being Bangladeshi, it is knowing how to share a small space with a lot of people. Indeed, the hopes and despairs, joys and frustrations, strengths and weaknesses of Bangladesh can all be rolled into one word: people. From birth, Bangladeshis grow up learning to share and use up every bit of available space with others.

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For me, this is new territory. When I left Bangladesh, the population was half of what it is today. Then I lived many years in the western United States, where space is abundant and solitude greatly valued. People jealously - sometimes ferociously - guard their privacy as well as their right to wide open spaces. "Personal space" a few feet of space surrounding a person - is almost sacred. To encroach on this space is rude, and to accidentally push, shove or nudge someone is a serious etiquette breach. To lose one's balance and fall on someone like I did in Gulistan would be grounds for red-faced embarrassment.

The roots of this Western mindset are physical and philosophical. The wide-open spaces of America, a low population density, and the importance of the individual in Western thought have all contributed to it.

In Bangladesh I learn that ethos of individuality is replaced with one of "making do with what we have". So, Bangladeshis get by with a very tight, almost nonexistent personal space. Some amount of jostling is expected, which explains the behaviour of the man in Gulistan.

But I suspect it goes beyond this. A Bangladeshi person occupying a spot on the sidewalk, a seat in a bus or train, or (part of) a bench in the park, knows deep inside that they are there only temporarily, and that others will use this spot once he or she has moved on. Does this view extend to the way they perceive their place in the cosmos, with "I am on earth for a short time, lucky to enjoy its bounties" replacing the more Western view of "The world is here for my enjoyment and consumption"?

In the one and a half years I have lived in Bangladesh, this profound cultural shift has changed my habits and views in subtle ways. For example, one day, due to a sudden downpour at my usual time, I was late for my morning run. When I reached the local park at 8:10am, the normally crowded place was deserted. My emotions surprised me: instead of rejoicing at having the park to myself, I was missing my fellow walkers, joggers and exercisers. Why were they not here, I wondered. Did the rain scare them off? Were they busy at home getting dressed for another day at the battlefields of work?

A similar attitude enables people here to accomplish tasks that are - to my eyes - astonishing, given the space constraints. One morning I stood on a narrow Dhaka side street in a low-income neighbourhood. An earlier rain had created a mega-puddle on the pothole-ridden road; a kind soul had placed a series of bricks for people to step