Familiarly Yours

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Being social animals, a large part of our time is spent in interacting with fellow humans. Often these are just chance encounters with strangers or semi-acquaintances. A typical trait of Bengali friendliness is to make personal comments or ask personal questions even at the first introduction.

Obnoxious observations regarding physical appearance is a popular way to break the ice. A former female employer comes to visit her old office after a decade and a half. She meets her erstwhile colleague in the lift; someone she hardly ever interacted with during her stint at the organisation. The first thing that pops out of his mouth is how much weight she has gained, so much so that she is almost unrecognisable from her former, skinnier self. He will keep reiterating the observation until the lift reaches his floor, by which time the dumbfounded victim of this onslaught will have been reduced to a pile of mortified mush making her vow never again to visit.

It may seem unbelievably rude but this is how most Bengalis greet each other – with insults. People may think that when someone observes: 'Oh you've lost all your hair' or 'You look like an old hag' that there is definitely malicious intent. Why else would someone say something so mean? But this is their way of being 'apon' or familiar. They think they are being funny and endearing. Of course the recipient of this wave of twisted affection may not really get it and may feel the irrepressible urge to punch them in the face and break a nose at least but that just isn't done. What is acceptable however, is to answer back with an equally lethal attack: 'Oh wow look at your paunch, you look ready to deliver.'

Most Bangladeshis do not believe in those westernised notions of 'privacy' and 'personal space'. This is what makes them so at ease with themselves when they walk in the streets, arms and legs flailing about regardless of who they are bumping against, talking loudly on the cell phone, unabashedly looking at females up and down, spitting out betel juice and other fluids their bodies regularly manufacture and generally giving off the aura that they are perfectly at home. In fact, the comfort levels reach a point when individuals think that the walls, drains and garbage dumps are their personal toilets and go about their business in full view of the public.

Dropping by unannounced is a favourite activity of Bangladeshis and displays this culture of over familiarity. The best time to do this would be early morning when people are still in their night clothes or frantically trying to get ready for work. Mealtimes or late at night when the hosts are about to tuck in their mosquito nets are also primetime for surprise visits.

Unscheduled visits to the office, especially, seem to be a common phenomenon, despite all the advancements in this 'digital age' where a phone call could so easily avoid the murderous thoughts one has at being interrupted in the middle of say, writing a column or editing a cover story. Unscheduled visitors will suddenly appear out of the woodwork and assume that their victim is available just because they are here. Subtle hints like looking at the wall clock or pretending to talk to someone on the phone will have no effect. Such visits are seldom short and tend to be quite challenging to the nerves. Outrageous requests will be made and irrelevant connections (my neice's brother-in-law was a former employer here, now he is an MD in a bank) spelt out. Escape from this trap is well-nigh impossible, unless you can just walk out of the office and sit in the park for a few hours.

Bangladeshis are also curious by nature and feel entitled to know everything about everyone. Any place where people have to wait - a doctor's chamber, diagnostic centre, airport, train station or bus terminal - the bombardment of questions from a Nosey Parker, is inevitable. Where is your *desher bari* (village home)? Are you married? Children? Bhai? (Husband?) What does he do? What is your salary? What kind of medical problem do you have?

For the uninitiated this may be quite a disturbing experience. One would think the only line of defence is to counter attack with equally probing questions. But life is seldom that simple. Your new friend (who will immediately become your brother, uncle, nephew, niece or brother in-law) will be more than happy to share the intimate details of their life. ■