

My social anxiety is holding me back

ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

Did you ever drink piping hot coffee, even though it's 40 degrees outside, because you didn't want to tell the barista they messed up your order for an iced drink? Yes? I can relate.

Ordering at restaurants is nerve-wracking for people who hate human interaction. By the time I'm at the front of the line, I've rehearsed my order nearly a dozen times in my head and then I realise that the baristas are friendly, and will be asking me about my day. My voice either gives up on me or cracks mid-sentence, or I say something stupid that'll keep me up all night.

Having social anxiety encompasses many experiences for me. There were times when I patted myself on the back for saying "hello" to someone spontaneously, and there were times when I refused to go up to the stage at the holud function of a dear cousin.

I also have occasional bursts of courage that a friend of mine calls "the mom friend override", which is when you carry out all the social interactions on behalf of a friend whose social anxiety is worse than yours. As you can see, there are the occasional good days, but this lining is greyer than silver if I'm being totally honest.

Social anxiety has downsides that go beyond being dubbed the asocial odd-ball by elders. For example, it's always



DESIGN: MRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN

been really difficult for me to make friends in new settings, as my character-istic awkwardness is often translated as standoffishness by others. I rarely make an appearance at family functions if my favourite cousin isn't going, and half of my relatives know me as my brother's younger sister.

I owe my lack of extracurricular achievements partially to my social anxiety, thanks to which I've always avoided activities that required me to go up on stage. The one time I was forced to do an extempore speech for a competition in front of others haunts me to this day. Every now and then, my brain helpfully

reminds me that I used the word "compassion" a whopping five times in five sentences that day. No, I did not win the competition, before you ask.

One of the worst drawbacks of having social anxiety is the difficulty I have in expressing affections for my loved ones, which is frustrating for them despite their understanding of my behaviour.

I've come a long way in terms of putting myself out there more. While I can take some credit for this improvement, it started when a particularly extroverted friend forcibly incorporated me into her circle and made me socialise.

For everyone who's struggling to come out of their shells – baby steps can take you a long way. Maybe ask the barista how their day is going, or drag yourself out of bed to dress up real nice and attend that wedding you don't want to go to.

Or you can keep scrolling on your phone and avoiding everyone. People aren't all that great, anyway.

Yell at Zabin Tazrin Nashita to fix her disastrous sleep schedule at fb.com/zabintazrin.nashita

The dangerous reality of being a woman on the streets of Dhaka

FATIN HAMAMA

Do you look back a lot while walking the streets even in broad daylight? Have you ever had a friend track you on Google Maps while you were in an Uber at night? Do you get to walk around late at night without having a trusted one's number on speed dial? Fear of getting pickpocketed is probably your only concern when you're amidst a crowd, yes?



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

If your first two answers are a no, and the rest are yes, I'm pretty sure that whoever you are, you're in no way a woman on the streets of Bangladesh.

For us, the drill begins even before we step a toe outside the threshold, no matter what time of the day it is. Turning on location sharing with a family member, grabbing pepper spray, putting on a stoic facial expression so that we look rather unapproachable before going out might sound overexaggerated, but this is exactly what more or less every woman I know has gone or goes through on a daily basis. However, that's only the beginning of it all.

The first thing we feel once we're outside is not the scorching heat or the sheer chaos of Dhaka. It's the constant predatory stares and snide remarks muttered and shouted from every possible direction. Half the women I see slipping in and out of the crowds on the overbridges and side-walks have their backpacks at the front as a way of protection from bad touch and usually, I'm one of them too.

Public transports are no respite either and are such a hotspot for passive harassment that it makes the option of walking by oneself seem like a "good" option. You may think that women who own personal transport and drive themselves have a fair bit of advantage, but that's not really the case either.

Firstly, the stares and scoffs intensify even more when a girl is seen riding a bicycle or a motorbike. Secondly, I've lost count of the times I've seen male drivers deliberately bumping into vehicles being driven by women and starting the usual string of misogynistic ramblings with nods from people around them.

What puts me in a perfect dilemma is how normalised it is for the majority of women to practise shrugging all these off from a shockingly young age but also, how hostile the situation becomes for a woman when she protests against the harassment she faced with half the mass around her pretending nothing happened and the rest turning on her with victim blaming.

I don't understand why people keep suggesting us to learn basic taekwondo and self-defence techniques just so that we can take a small walk down the street? Staying on guard every minute of one's existence outside isn't really a solution when they're the ones who must be granted the right to safety on the roads. It's almost as if there's a general societal consensus in Bangladesh that no woman on the streets has rights over her own body, let alone her safety.

Hamama's problems smell like daruchini because she's duweep into them 24/7. Send help at fatin.hamama003@gmail.com

The Calendar at the Heart of Bengali Culture

SHIMIN MUSHSHARAT

At different times of the year, we often notice our cities and towns adorned in vibrant colours. They are painted yellow on the first day of Falgun. Baishakh is welcomed with fairs and rallies, red and white ensembles, traditional meals, and old customs. Kites fly in the skies of Old Dhaka at the end of Poush, turning it into a kaleidoscope of brightly coloured papers.

This fondness for festivities is summed up in the saying "Bengalis have thirteen *parvans* (festivals) in twelve months." They observe these age-old cultural festivals by following the Bangla calendar.

There are different schools of thought about how the Bangla calendar has evolved to its present structure. Some contribute it to Mughals and some to Raja Shashank. Regardless of the origin, it was in use during both of these periods. The predecessor of today's Bangla calendar was used to collect taxes in the Mughal era.

The calendar was amended by Dr Muhammad Shahidullah in 1956. Later, the Bangladesh government adopted it as the official calendar in 1986. It has been followed along with the Gregorian calendar ever since. The latest amendment took place in 2019, pushing the first day of spring to February 14.

The cultural celebrations of Bangladesh mostly revolve around its seasons. *Pahela Baishakh*, the biggest festival of Bengalis, is celebrated to welcome the Bangla New Year. The tradition of opening a new *haal khata* or a ledger on this day is hundreds of years old.

Barsha utsab is observed to mark the beginning of the monsoon. *Sakra*, the kite festival is held at the end of the Bangla month of Chaitra. *Boshonto boron*, the arrival of spring is rooted in the change of seasons as well.

Some similar festivities are *Nabanna*, the celebration of the harvest of new crops, boat race, and the *piha utsab* which celebrates locally made cakes and desserts. Some of these were previously only held in villages on a much smaller scale. Over the years, connectivity has spread due to the easy access to technology. These festivals have become nationwide celebrations as a result.

Bangladesh's many indigenous communities have multitudes of yearly festivals and traditions, too. The Chakma's *Phool Biju*, the Tripura's *Boisu* and the Marma's *Sangrai* are some of these festivities that take place on the last two days of Chaitra and the first day of Baishakh.

Cultural festivities also include celebrating the lives and works of authors, poets, and philosophers. Rabindranath Tagore's birthday on Baishakh 25 and Kazi Nazrul Islam's birthday on Joishtho 11 are often celebrated together as Rabindra - Nazrul Jayanti, in May. Their contribution to Bangla literature has a great impact on this

continent's culture.

Tagore and Nazrul both were influenced by Lalon Shah, one of the greatest minds to ever grace Bengal. His philosophy, poetry, and mysticism have shaped a large part of Bangladesh and West Bengal's spiritual culture.

His search for spirituality denounced caste and creed, the hierarchy of society and the conflict of religious beliefs. Common people could effortlessly access his work because of the simplicity of his language and musical instruments. Lalon criticised the divide in humans while vouching for the search for soul above all else. Thus, he has collected disciples from

from the official Bangla calendar. Some historians believe that the ancient Hindu traditions that circled around the sun, called Surya in Sankrit, have much influence on today's Bangla calendar. Durga Puja is the main annual Hindu festival. Their other celebrations include Holi, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja, and many more.

Buddhists follow a lunisolar calendar, which follows the orbits of both the sun and the moon. Although, it is largely based on the calendar used by the Hindus. Buddhists in Bangladesh celebrate Buddha Purnima, Madhu Purnima and Kathin Chibar Dan.

National holidays that stem from

their hearts.

University students play a large part in keeping the traditions alive by planning yearly festivities such as *Mongol Shobhajatra* and painting *alpona*. Local brands and institutions arrange seasonal fairs and exhibitions. But these celebrations have inevitably been influenced by globalisation.

In recent years, local festivals have been incorporating more and more foreign elements. Sakrain, the kite festival, has gone through significant changes over the years. The main focus has shifted from flying kites to fireworks and music. The timeline has also been shortened from a month-long homely arrangement to one



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED



PHOTO: LS ARCHIVE

a wide array of communities.

Lalon passed away on the first day of Kartik of the Bangla year 1297 (1890 AD). Each year on Dol Purnima, fairs are held by his devoted disciples in honour of his work and legacy. The importance of Lalon festivals lies in the fact that they are celebrated by people of

Different religious groups abide by their own calendars. The Muslim festivals are celebrated in accordance with the lunar Hijri calendar. Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha are two of the most prominent yearly occasions for Muslims. The Bangla calendar is thought to be influenced by this calendar by a group of historians.

Hindu religious festivals follow their own *Panjika*. It has a difference of one day

political events such as the International Mother Language Day, Independence Day, and Victory Day refer to the Gregorian calendar. The Bangla calendar was amended to match the Gregorian calendar for this specific reason, proving that since its birth, Bangladesh has favoured the English calendar for official purposes.

There is little to no practical use of the Bangla calendar in academia or offices. Schools, colleges, and universities exclusively use the Gregorian calendar on daily basis. Non-government institutions are pretty much the same. Some government documents still have the Bangla dates written along with the English ones. But even then, the English calendar is prioritised.

The Bangla months and dates are still written by some institutions and media. Newspapers and television channels feature news regarding Bangla months and seasons. People involved with art, culture, and literature keep the calendar close to

single day.

Along with the evolution of local traditions, people now celebrate and observe international days with increasing fervour. The New Year on January 1, Valentine's Day (which coincides now with Pahela Falgun), and International Women's Day are just to name a few.

The Bangla calendar is rooted deeply in Bangladeshi hearts and culture even though the offices and academics depend heavily on the Gregorian calendar. Most of the country's traditional, cultural, and indigenous festivals rely on the Bangla dates. These rituals, *utsabs* and *parvans* are old as the Bengal is. Passed down from generation to generation, they tie Bengalis past and present together and weave the tapestry of their collective identity.

Shimin reads everything she can find, talks to cats, and writes a lot of letters. Send her a book at shim.mush@gmail.com