



ECHOES BY
ASRAR CHOWDHURY

Claustrophobia, and the lack of open spaces in Dhaka

I
The opening scene of Federico Fellini's 1963 classic, *8½*, is one of the most influential opening scenes in the history of cinema.

Marcello Mastroianni drives into a traffic jam. As he stops, a man looks back at him from the front car. He's not amused. The camera pans slowly. A man in the back seat of a car looks at Marcello. The camera pans; the driver is a lady. She's sleeping. Why not? Who knows when this will end? Marcello wipes the windscreen of his car. The camera pans out. People are helpless and hopeless in the jam. The worst part: the people have accepted the lack of space and movement as a part of their life.

While Marcello wiped his windscreen, his car began to fill up with smoke. He finds it difficult to breathe. Claustrophobia. The people in the cars fail to notice Marcello. He fights to get out of the car. Just when he seems to have lost the battle, Marcello is free.

II
From birth to adult life, I've moved from one "open-ended" campus to another. When I was born, my father was a young professor at Chittagong College. Soon after, we found ourselves in the green and open campus of Jahangirnagar University. When I was four, my father went



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

to study at a university town in Wales. Aberystwyth. The Cardigan Bay was to its west, giving some of the prettiest sunsets in the UK. I never felt suffocated.

We returned to Bangladesh, to Jahangirnagar University. I spent my middle and high school, college and university here. The campus then was much more open than it is now. Again, I never felt

suffocated.

I joined Jahangirnagar as a young lecturer. Soon, I was off to another campus in the UK. It was Cambridge, in England. That was the last open-ended campus I enjoyed. Upon return to Bangladesh, I have been teaching at Jahangirnagar, but have been living in Dhaka in my ancestral stead.

Ever since I started living in Dhaka, I feel suffocated. This city is not the "open-ended" environment I took for granted for more than three decades of my life. Whatever the time of the day, my residential area is always busy. You can't walk on the street. It's always noisy. It's easy to blame the authorities, but more difficult to ask, how can I solve this problem?

There are pockets of open spaces around my residential area. I can access them. The thought of walking or cycling to those pockets in a city that's not open-ended and spilling with noise of high decibels, high pollution, and un-walkable footpaths puts me off.

When at home, I prefer to stay in the comfort of my study. Thinking of my childhood, adolescence, and adulthood of taking open spaces for granted, makes me feel claustrophobic. I'm in Dhaka not out of choice, but out of circumstance. I want to escape the closed suffocating space like Marcello in *8½*. The thought of an escape from Dhaka is a bad dream that brings me back to reality.

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satire.

What if Facebook commenters became your therapist?

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

Sadman: Hello, everyone. I'd say "Good morning" but I had to take a two-hour bus ride for compulsory attendance for a degree I didn't choose. Clearly, there's nothing good about my mornings and that's exactly why you're here.

Sigma Fraud (SF): Was this meeting really necessary? Couldn't this crippling depression crisis be mitigated through a poorly-worded Facebook post and some light-hearted generic comments?

Sadman: Unfortunately, that didn't work. I tried opening separate Facebook accounts for each of the voices in my head so that they can have their own social space to dump their misery and let doom scrolling take care of the rest. However, the voices won't stop. My anxiety and panic attacks are taking over.

With the help of internet, I've been diagnosed with something between crippling depression and a terminal illness. I finally took my mom's advice and decided to talk to people about my mental health. You've

always been supportive of my internet paragraphs and so I reached out to you.

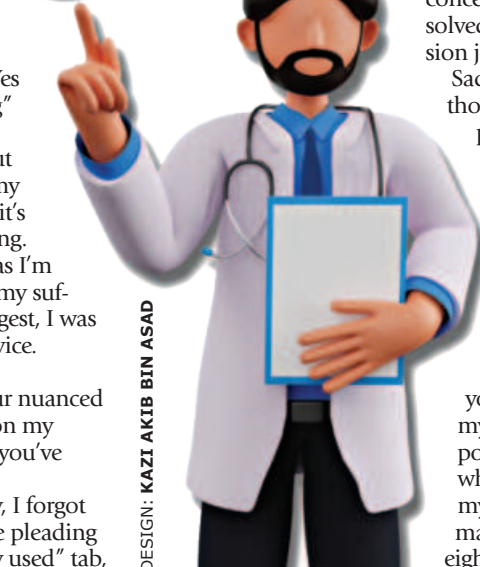
SF: Well, this is clearly a case of acute Attention Seeking Syndrome. I'm prescribing a daily dose of "Yes King" with "Stay strong, King" twice a day. On bad days, try taking "yes" with extra "s". But I should warn you – one of my patients overdosed and now it's his only response to everything.

Sadman: Fraud, as much as I'm happy that you can relate to my suffering as your comments suggest, I was looking for more realistic advice.

SF: It is what it is, King.

Sadman: Oh, you and your nuanced ways of telling me to choke on my problems! Faria, I'm hoping you've some useful advice for me.

Angel Faria (AF): I'm sorry, I forgot my emojis at home. I had the pleading face emoji on my "frequently used" tab,



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

ready for your posts. I was going to top it off with an "Aww, you'll do great!" My meaningless templated concern would've solved your depression just like that! Sadman: I— I thought those pleading faces were exclusive to me! You were always the first one to react and comment on my post. When you reacted to my 1300-word post of me whining about my engineering major, within eight seconds, you

didn't even bother reading it did you? Did you even care when my dog died?

AF: You had a dog? Sorry, what I meant to say was, "Aww, dw! Just chill, fr."

Sadman: At least I have a mental health group therapist among us. Dr Bishal, help me out, please.

Dr Bishal (DB): Of course, Sadman. What else's bothering you?

Sadman: My family's severe financial crisis is only worsening my depression. Dad's been bedridden after his accident last month and so I have to work two jobs. My childhood trauma's coming back in my nightmares so I'm afraid to sleep. It all started when—

DB: Stop. You had me at "depression". I advise you to start looking into your faith.

Sadman: But doctor, hear me out. I do pray regularly but this trauma—

DB: Unfortunately, the session's over. That'll be 10 thousand bucks. You're welcome.

Remind Ifti to be quieter at hasiburrashidifti@gmail.com