

EMPATHY FATIGUE

A troubling reality plaguing our society

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Though "treat everyone as you want to be treated" has always been my life's mantra, the demise of empathy in our society has been a major source of my lack of motivation. From street corners to social media, the decline feels palpable. Despite my best efforts to practice empathy – to offer a kind word, to share what I have – it often feels futile in an environment that seems to reward apathy. Each incident – whether it's the plight of stray animals abandoned to suffer or the struggles of rickshaw pullers denied their means of livelihood – feels like a further example of societal indifference. And this indifference is not random; it is systemic.

Two recent events exemplify this troubling reality. The first details the government's move to ban battery-run rickshaws, which provide a livelihood to countless lower-middle-class workers, without addressing alternative solutions for their survival. The Chamber Judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court only later halted the High Court ruling to ban battery-powered rickshaws in the Dhaka Metropolitan area. The second is an account of the tragic fate of stray animals in Japan Garden City, a housing society in Dhaka, where urban callousness has led to mass cruelty and extermination. These are not isolated incidents. These incidents are symptoms of a deeper malaise – a system that erodes empathy, leaving its most vulnerable victims, both human and non-human, to bear the brunt.

Neoliberal capitalism has long been critiqued for creating an ecosystem of detachment. As Susan J. Olson (2012) has argued, corporations under neoliberalism function with a psychopathic disregard for societal well-being, focusing solely on profit maximisation. This culture is deeply ingrained in our society, encouraging individuals to prioritise self-interest over collective good.

In such a context, empathy is treated as an expendable commodity. The fate of the battery-run rickshaw pullers exemplifies this. These workers, often rural migrants, already navigate precarious economic realities. The ban on their vehicles, justified under

the banner of urban orderliness and energy efficiency, ignores their lived realities. There is no robust plan to compensate for their losses or integrate them into alternative forms of employment. It is a classic example of neoliberal governance: tidy the streets, appease the urban middle class, and leave the marginalised to fend for themselves.

Similarly, the extermination of stray animals in Japan Garden City reveals the moral cost of urban isolation. In gated communities, residents often see themselves as distinct from the chaos of the city, their lives governed by order and convenience. Stray animals, perceived as nuisances, are removed without a second thought. This callousness stems not from individual malice but from a system that has trained us to look away.

The urban middle class, cocooned in the comforts of gated apartments and ride-sharing apps, operates in a bubble that justifies their apathy. Stray animals and rickshaw pullers exist on the periphery of their neatly curated lives, their struggles abstract and distant.

This bubble is further reinforced by urbanisation, which isolates individuals from the collective struggles of their communities. The physical density of cities belies spiritual loneliness – a phenomenon exacerbated by the relentless pace of urban living. In such an environment, practising empathy requires conscious effort, a commodity that is increasingly scarce.

The victims of this empathy deficit are always those without a voice. The battery-run rickshaw pullers belong to a group perpetually overlooked. Unlike the working class, they are not romanticised as symbols of resilience;

unlike the upper middle class, they lack the means to demand attention.

They live in limbo, easily expendable in the calculus of urban governance.

Animals, too, fall prey to this systemic apathy. In a city like Dhaka, where even human suffering often goes unnoticed, the lives of stray animals are considered irrelevant. Yet, their fate mirrors our moral trajectory. A society that justifies cruelty to animals as necessary for urban tidiness will eventually justify cruelty to humans under similar pretences.

Neoliberalism's focus on individual success discourages collective efforts towards social justice, framing empathy as a weakness rather than a strength. Political discourses that advocate for empathy as a tool for addressing inequality are often dismissed as idealistic, hindering the possibility of meaningful change. As Olson notes, this culture of apathy creates a feedback loop. The more disconnected we become, the less likely we are to engage empathetically with

others. Over time, this detachment manifests as societal decay, where inequalities deepen, and the suffering of the vulnerable is normalised.

The antidote to this crisis lies in challenging the structures that perpetuate apathy. Policies must be designed with empathy at their core, prioritising the needs of the marginalised. Urban planning must account for the interconnectedness of all lives, recognising that the well-being of stray animals or rickshaw pullers is tied to the moral health of the city.

On an individual level, empathy must be practised as resistance. It is not enough to feel pity; empathy requires action, whether through advocacy, volunteering, or simply acknowledging the existence of those around us.

As I reflect on the changes I have observed, I am reminded that practising empathy in



a world designed to suppress it is a radical act. It is also an exhausting one. Yet, if we give up, what remains? A society where cruelty is the norm and care is the exception. That is not the world I want to live in. It is not a world any of us should accept.

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Shared spaces, shared lives

Growing up sharing a room with your sibling

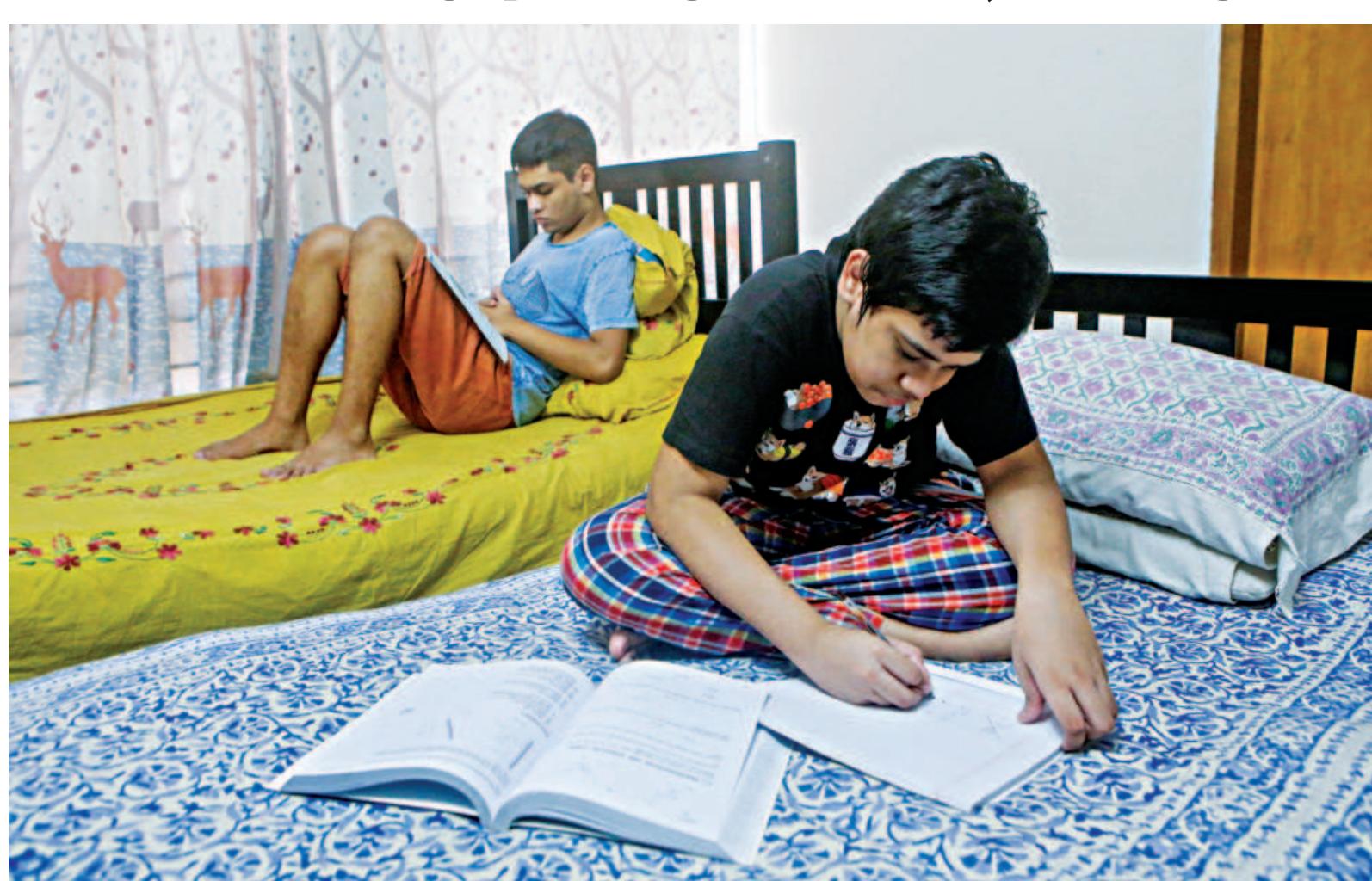


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR

Over the years, amidst endless tugs of war thrashing disputes over territory and stolen blankets, I mastered the art of thriving in a shared space. The constant state of low-grade warfare, triggered by things like a sock left on "my side" of the room, marked grounds

for immediate retaliation.

Growing up having to share rooms with my younger sibling, I can attest to all the details of cohabitation – the chaos and the conflicts, the occasional moments of camaraderie that turn the squabbles almost worthwhile. Siblinghood is a paradox. The relentless hovering between affection and rivalry

only escalates as two or more distinct personalities are compelled to coexist between four walls.

Sharing a room with your sibling can be an experience that's both challenging and fulfilling. While a few families view the idea as a preference – a conscious effort to strengthen bonds between siblings – others see it

as a necessity, mostly a consequence of their living situation.

The biggest hurdle of room-sharing has to be the consistent invasion of privacy. The lack of individual spaces while navigating a shared bedroom often leads to mounting frustration. The idea of personal solitude seems distant. The absence of quiet corners to retreat to after a rough day, or the constant intrusion of someone rummaging through your belongings – such a lack of boundaries sets you to adapt in ways that aren't always comfortable.

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Besides, it often becomes difficult to strike a balance between varied interests and the clashing appetites of two different people living together. For instance, I would constantly find myself engaging in fights with my brother over things as silly as the genre of posters hanging on the walls, the colour of our room's curtains, or even regulating the speed of the ceiling fan. Quarrels turn into tussles, each of us digging our heels in until somebody comes up with some form of mutual agreement.

The disputes eventually settle, but the underlying friction between incompatible living habits persists.

For instance, I am someone who despises visual clutter. My junior roommate, on the other hand, is a bit of a hoarder, and everything from old magazines to random trinkets slowly

squeeze into the corners of our shared room, shattering my minimalist approach to organisation and, at times, leaving me feeling overwhelmed.

This extends to differing learning styles and schedules, such as requiring solitary spaces to endure focus, as opposed to requiring consistent guidance or reading aloud, resulting in constant interruptions. Often, you might find either of us circling for quiet corners around the house.

However, the constant negotiation over personal spaces pushes you to compromise and find means to adapt on a regular basis. Over time, this teaches you to respect boundaries while learning to share and accommodate each other's needs, forging a stronger sense of cooperation and mutual understanding.

Sharing a room with your sibling is undoubtedly arduous yet rewarding in several ways. The moments of aggression and bickering will continue to persist, but those experiences simultaneously foster invaluable life skills such as communication, empathy, and, essentially, learning to strike a middle ground.

The shared-room experience isn't all chaos and commotion. Rather, it comes with its fair share of joy and togetherness. For those who have lived through it, memories flood back in the form of borrowed belongings, muffled whispers exchanging secrets, and peals of laughter. One moment you're enraged in trivial arguments over who left the door ajar, the next, you're huddled together as the horror flick starts unleashing terrifying jump scares.

Titir lies wide awake at night, as her brother refuses to turn the lights off. Help her convince him ghosts aren't real at punomirahman@gmail.com