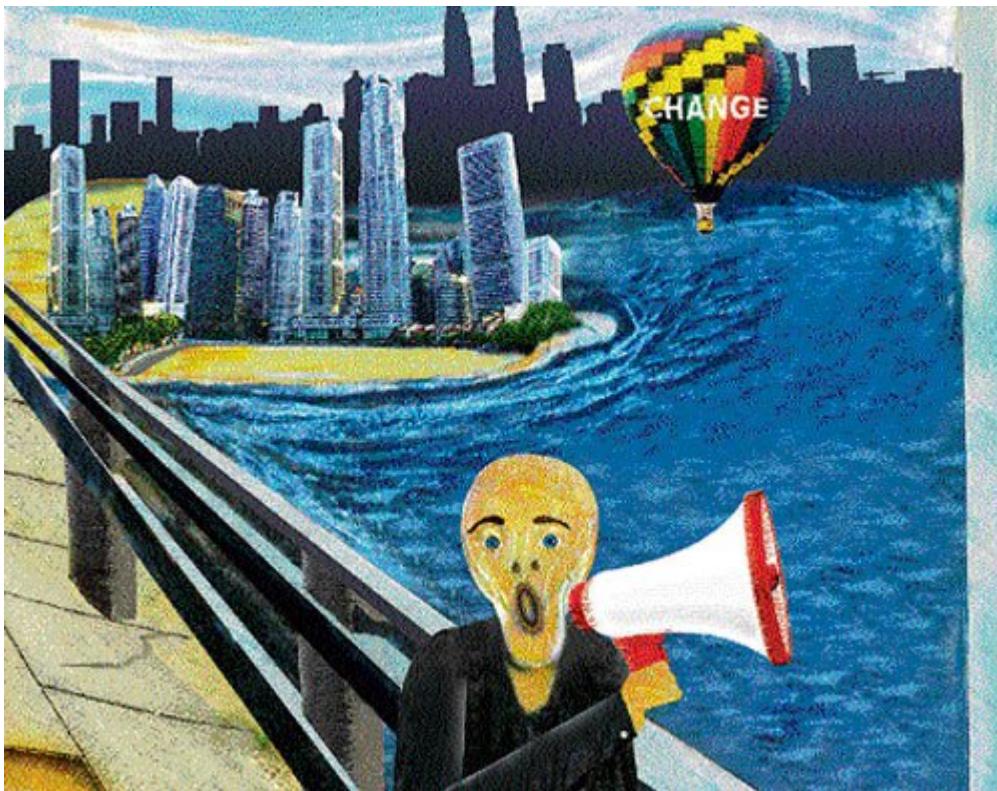


The spiral of silence

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The spiral of silence

When we see unfairness around us, our reaction is mostly to remain silent. The courage that is required to speak up in such situations is wanting. The negativity and the fear of confrontation force us to forfeit our rights and silence our voice of gumption. But, isn't it about time we stood up for ourselves, and for others, wonders
Shefali Tripathi Mehta

A new series of TV commercials that show the house-help being asked by the family to join them at the dining table for a meal, and a waiter being offered a cold drink by the customers he is serving, seem to have struck a chord with us. It asserts, 'Hawa badlegi', the winds of change are imminent.

So, who will bring the change? Any change, not just to have the house-help sit on the sofa with us, but the transformation of the innumerable situations which make us feel cheated, defeated, wronged because these are wrought out of some bias, unfairness, unreasonableness, or simply, unthinking, unsympathetic attitudes?

Big and little heartaches, injustices of life dot our days. Initially, when we are exposed to the vagaries of living in a world with others and the skewed balance of right and wrong, most of us try to take things on, improve, and make a difference. Gradually, as our attempts are thwarted, the 'what can I do?' helplessness that dismays at first goes on to become a way of life, a convenient refrain.

When we see a vehicle that is speeding, erratically driven, or the driver talking on mobile phone, we fume but do nothing about it. If the vehicle hits someone, kills someone, we are outraged. Bangalore hasn't forgotten the 2006 accident involving a Volvo bus that ploughed into a bus shelter killing two and injuring 20. Yet, today, it is not uncommon to see Volvo bus drivers deep in conversation on their mobile phones while driving the enormous, speedy buses through our delinquent traffic. Why don't the passengers object?

Blinding biases

We look for 'someone we know' in government offices, police department or any other agency that we need to 'deal' with; on being harassed or cheated, we do not report for fear of consequences, of a backlash. We conform to the 'take it or leave' attitude of those in control everywhere. Little children get abused in school buses and in schools, yet we do not report suspicious or unacceptable events or behaviour because we are afraid of the school's disapproval or action against us. The same obsequious attitude persists in our other dealings — schools and colleges impose arbitrary rules, demand 'development charges' without receipt; packed malls and film theatres that make a few hundred on each ticket keep air conditioning switched off; clerks in offices are 'not on their seat' for hours while we wait; the courier reaches us in 10 days; some post never reaches us; the grocery store does not add the 'free' item; overcrowded ticketing, billing counters have one working among the several unmanned; and railways, the lifeline of the millions, grows out of bounds for them as shoddy technology in the name of progress takes over reservations, and touts find loopholes to sell tickets to those who can buy at a premium.

A person, apparently of limited means, travelling in an airplane, was treated contemptuously by the cabin attendant who kept asking him rudely what his problem (illness) was, insisting on speaking in English, a language clearly the passenger did not understand. The gentleman and his escort were travelling for treatment to a big city and only dire necessity could have compelled them to take a flight. The crew's duty is to serve the passengers and not judge who deserves their attention or contempt. But bigotry and biases make people shame their position repeatedly. The person who needed the most care onboard was ignored and humiliated, and men in business suits, completely capable of wearing their own jackets, were graciously helped into them.

What were the other travellers, I included, doing? Watching it all, feeling the anger, the shame, the indignation, and yet keeping quiet? After I registered a complaint and was assured of necessary action, the incident came up on social media, people were disgusted, shared similar experiences and offered recourse, including never patronising the airline again. But social media is only a likeness of the real world. It is easy to vent on online forums. The courage that is required to speak up in real situations is wanting.

The negativity, and the fear of confrontation, of not finding support from others, or simply of what onlookers may dismiss as 'making a scene', stops us from putting ourselves into confrontational situations, forfeit our rights and silence our voice of gumption.

Apathetic system

Early this April, in a small town in Uttar Pradesh, four sisters aged between 20 and 30 years were returning home in the evening after invigilating a school exam when two men on a motorcycle sprayed acid on them with a Holi pichkari. One girl, severely injured, lost an eye, and the others suffered burns in the brazen attack, which was someone's idea of fun, perhaps? Another young girl lost an eye and lies critically burnt after an acid attack on her just as she arrived in Mumbai to join the Army.

We, especially women, are told to fear and not take on hooligans, jealous exes and eve-teasers who may resort to revenge and who always seem to get away without punishment. Criminals, perverts, thieves and petty wrongdoers are a part of the society we live in. But for them to take control, to go about audaciously committing crimes and not be punished, adds to the despondency of the man on the street.

We have seen people losing lives over trifles. We have witnessed the ordeal the families of Sabrina Lal, Aman Kachru and Nitish Katara went through to get justice for their loved ones. But for each one that got justice, distressingly delayed even, there are hundreds that didn't — Sanjana Singh of Bangalore, who died when a wall that was found to be of poor quality, constructed with no inspection and supervision, collapsed on her; or Kshama Chopra Shetye of Gurgaon who, along with her unborn baby, was crushed under the wheels of a rashly-driven BMW. We know how difficult the path to redress is. The fight is not just against the criminals, but against a system that seems to harass the victim.

Our judiciary, law, government, police cannot ensure that our rights will always be safeguarded. We know how money, status and power prevail over our rights. We have seen how those that have harmed and killed whistle blowers and RTI activists have not been brought to book. Manjunath Shanmugam and Satyendra Dubey were brazenly killed for trying to stop corrupt practices.

When in 1990, Ruchika Girhotra, 14, of Haryana, molested by the Inspector General of Police, SPS Rathore, made a complaint, she, her family and friends, were so harassed by the police that she committed suicide. It took almost 20 years before Rathore was pronounced guilty and given a diminutive sentence. Ruchika's friend and eyewitness, Aradhana Prakash, did not buckle under the threats and fought for justice for her friend till the case was closed two decades later. But she is among the brave hearts that show exemplary, extraordinary courage. Normally, life demands less from us. By conceding our right to speak up against little wrongs like when cable TV, water supply, auto rickshaw unions act like mafia and render our rights ineffective, we encourage wrongdoers and set a vicious cycle of crime into motion.

A Mumbai housing society where people have been living and paying property and corporation taxes for 23 years has been declared unauthorised and is facing the threat of demolition. While the defaulting builders have absconded, the residents face an uncertain future. In the meanwhile, there are a hundred other illegal structures that are allowed construction so money can be made. How do we bear such skewed forms of legality?

Speak up, speak out

“Some things you must always be unable to bear. Some things you must never stop refusing to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonour and shame. No matter how young you are or how old you have got... Just refuse to bear them.” (William Faulkner)

V S Sunder, who has raised his voice against the inflexibility and insensitivity with which people with disabilities are treated, recounts incident after incident of blatant disregard of their rights. Why should a person on wheelchair have to stand up for security check at the airport? Why should not the companion be allowed to accompany them? Why must the person be physically lifted to a seat somewhere in the middle of the aircraft? Why must all the questions be directed to their escort?

When a queue breaker comes barging in to get served first, we have the option to remind them politely; demand they come in line; or fume and do nothing about it. A person who has the audacity to break queue, will most likely not be affected by any of this and nothing will be achieved. If, however, the person at the counter refuses to take the order of the queue breaker, would anyone break the queue in the first place? Those in authority, those in charge, must act with fairness, always.

Humiliation and a sense of wrong made Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela fight injustice. When Rosa Parks was asked if she had not given her bus seat to a white because she was tired, she said, “No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

As Bangalore grapples with a population explosion that has its limited resources stretched to seams, we face acute problems of garbage disposal, water shortage, dumping of sewage water into lakes and contamination of water pipelines, chaotic traffic, missing pavements, indiscriminate tree cutting leading to loss of the green cover and rise in temperatures; superfluous, shoddily made, bumpy flyovers, the usefulness of which shall never be questioned; the buses that move and stop arbitrarily jamming traffic; the underpasses that have, despite protests, been dug and then abandoned following PILs, rendering the roads unusable; randomly constructed medians with no storm water outlets leading to flooding of roads after a 10-minute shower, we do nothing more than sigh.

The bellicose & the nosy parkers

Our anger and frustration with a system we cannot change surfaces in undesirable ways — road rage and unnecessary fights with fellow citizens. We live in an atmosphere of distrust, believing everyone is out to cheat and harm us. On an evening out, as we parked into an empty slot, two vociferous women with children came charging and began to fight because apparently we had parked where they were planning to. Since our action was

unintentional and without malice, we waited while they vented. I wondered about those women starting off an outing with so much anger. What were the children accompanying them thinking and assimilating? Couldn't they, if they felt wronged in the situation, have dealt with it with less acridity? Had they approached us with a 'we had wanted to park here, could you park elsewhere?' I doubt we would have refused.

Keerti, a friend who will go out of her way to ask after and help others, often wonders if people think of her as intrusive. Asking your neighbours unnecessary personal details is intrusive, being alert is not. If, for example, neighbours had been a little vigilant, would those poor kids who had been holed up in a Jaipur house, have gone unnoticed? Nearly 50 children, aged between 5 and 17, were kept in two illegal children's homes in a residential colony for months with little food and in pathetic living conditions and no one noticed?

A burgeoning population of upwardly mobile, disposable-income-equipped middle class that can buy its safety and security, peace and distance, is increasingly seeking an easy way out, creating an insulated world for itself. If we can't deal with apathetic agencies, we hire agents to get jobs done; if we can't send our kids in unsafe school buses, we send them in chauffeur-driven cars; if we can't send them to colleges for fear of ragging, we send them abroad or to the five-star institutions that offer mineral water and airconditioned hostels; if roads are unwalkable, we step out in cars. This disengagement with society leads to more blatant abuse of our rights. We continue to pay taxes towards infrastructure, public security, services like roads, streetlights, garbage collection, health services, preservation of monuments, emergency and disaster relief, but cannot be bothered by the sordid state of these.

Winds of change

In Bangalore, illegal dumping of construction material into Bellandur Lake at night was reported by irate residents and was stopped. But the audacity with which people do and get away with wrong because they are rarely punished, and because of the powerful that back them, stops us from making the effort and risk courting danger.

But how can we dream of change if we continue to keep silent? Change is not made without inconvenience. Complaining from the margins will not do. Social change does not require superheroes. We can each aim for a ripple effect — help one person and it helps their family, the community, and person by person, we help the world; set one thing right; or fight for that one cause that moves us. Each one of us has the power to make some impact.

As the American biologist E O Wilson famously said, "We are drowning in information while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesisers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely." Information is key — to be aware of our own and other people's rights, and to know what to do when — how to administer first aid, help accident victims, who to inform in case of an accident, fallen electric wires, cutting of trees, garbage or

debris being dumped, kids employed, or when house-help is ill-treated. Why let the wrong prevail? Why not speak up for what is right, always and every time?