

Next door to nobody

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Next door to nobody

Not too long ago, neighbours were extended family; people we could count on, at any time of the day or night. Sadly, it's a changed scenario now when we do not even know who our next door neighbours are, rues Shefali Tripathi Mehta

There are no proverbial heppige mosaru or sugar-asking, bowl-in-hand neighbours anymore. And no one's ruing the absence, yet. The word 'neighbour' has a typical connotation. A neighbour is neither a friend nor a relative. A fuzzy relation. When you introduce someone as your neighbour, people smile understandingly.

A neighbour is supposed to know you not from what you tell them about yourself, but from what they observe and overhear — how you conduct yourself in your daily dealings with people — house-help, courier guys, postman, presswala, driver; how you treat the space just outside your home — if you think of it as an extension of your house and encroach upon common space with shoe racks, children's bicycles, discarded items or beautify it with rangolis, urns and urlis; how much you respect others' privacy — not lurking at the windows to catch raised voices, not peeping in when their doors are left ajar; how much consideration you show by keeping noise low, inquiring when unwell; how you celebrate and how you fight. As G K Chesterton puts it, "Your next-door neighbour is not a man; he is an environment. He is the barking of a dog; he is the noise of a piano; he is a dispute about a party wall; he is drains that are worse than yours, or roses that are better than yours."

When investigating crime, police ask neighbours what the victim/s were like. Did they smile much? Did they argue much? Did they entertain? Who were their frequent visitors? Neighbours, even when not friends, are expected to know, have an impression, without really keeping a 24x7 watch.

Extended family

Growing up in a small city, in a close-knit neighbourhood, we never bumped into closed doors — literally and otherwise. We didn't take appointments to visit. Just thought of someone and walked right into their drawing rooms. Neighbours bartered more than food. Kids shared homes and families. The neighbourhood 'owned' all kids in a way that if you saw someone else's kid leaning out of a window dangerously, you could go whack the kid and in the same spirit, if a kid was being whacked by their parent, you tried to stop them. Neighbours were extended family.

If you happened to be at a neighbour's at mealtimes, you didn't have to leave politely seeing the table being laid. You just joined them at it. If there was a party next door, there was no question of asking if you could help. You just presented yourself and helped with the preparations, leaving discreetly if you were not among those invited. It was perfectly okay. We didn't live in joint families anymore, but neighbours made up for that. We watched over sleeping babies and sat the sick. When there was security in being together, we didn't need private watchmen or grills on windows. We slept on terraces and courtyards. We burrowed holes into hedges to make friendly visits next door easy. Lot of undesirable stuff didn't happen for the fear of neighbours coming to know — the 'what will people say' factor. Those days of sitting in the winter sun with neighbours and playing antakshari during power failures on starry, summer nights have left such lasting memories that today, fostered by the common feeling of nostalgia, we bond instantly.

The husband talks of his ancestral home which had a small opening, a small window in the wall between their and the neighbour's kitchen so food could be exchanged, and I guess, ladies confined to kitchens most day, could catch up, talk and vent.

But it is also true that we tend to view the past through the soft-focus lens of memory. So we overlook and can now laugh at things that were loathsome then, like those boring neighbours who sat endlessly talking about themselves and refusing to leave; the nosy parkers who wanted to know our marks to the last decimal; the compulsive borrowers of books, cutlery and chairs.

How wired we are!

Last year, looking for a relative's house in Bhopal, we had one of their neighbours direct us and later follow us to check if we had reached. Needless to say, the hosts invited him inside to be formally introduced after which he politely took leave refusing to stay for tea or talk. With our phones and cars fitted with the GPRS, this type of heart-warming civility is bound to become a gold-edged memory.

In our quick dash for the utopic 'independence' — of not being dependent on anyone for anything, we forget that we are leaving people behind and the more we reject people, the more we depend on things. Every form of human interaction is rejected over automated ones — call centres with their rehearsed, recorded lines; dependable household gadgets in place of falling-sick-without-informing house-help. Under a false impression of freeing ourselves, we are instead tying ourselves tighter in a cocoon, becoming increasingly self-occupied and perhaps lonely in a way that we have 2,000 virtual friends but not one next door to knock and ask if all is well.

With the Internet and credit cards at our disposal, we have everything delivered to the door and can live life anonymously. Time was when we were obliged to be nice to neighbours. In case of illness, mishap, accident or bereavement, it was the neighbours who were by our side, offering help without asking. Now, instead of people, we need things that keep us wired to people. We are content to be E-neighbours.

Why will we step into the neighbour's to ask their mother to help make mango pickle when we can Google two dozen recipes and can even watch a live demo online on YouTube? People are no longer lonely alone inside their homes because they can talk endlessly on phone, text, chat or even video chat all day. We don't need neighbours to come over and ask our haal-chaal anymore. Some families with children or spouses in different locations have Skype on all day, almost like they were at home together. Who wants the neighbour to come and interrupt with their real presence the virtual reality we are living in?

Choice generation

Everyone wants 'nice' neighbours. But just like the 14 kinds of cheese one can now choose from, we are not content with 'nice' alone which may just be quiet, amiable and helpful. We want neighbours with who we would like to be seen with. For increasingly, we live for a social face — the superficial existence where everyone and their friends must be seen as stylish, connoisseurs of things fine, achievers.

Some of us do not get to know a neighbour simply because we have never bumped into them by chance and we are absolutely stuck on the neighbourly etiquette that the new neighbour come by and say hello first. Some very nice people may be shy and not arrogant or uncouth like we presume. Standing on formality and unbending custom, we reject people. While families with babies and pets find it easier to mingle in a new neighbourhood as people open up more easily with a baby or pet between them, others may stay reclusive.

“People are almost always better than their neighbours think they are,” wrote George Eliot in *Middlemarch*. But in our busy, nineteen to the dozen lives, where is the time to get to know them? The ‘Me generation’ when confronted with good social intention such as inviting the new neighbours over, will find a way to wriggle out of it — I would, but we’re renovating, the house-help is off, I’m travelling, I’m tired, I just have no time! We choose convenience over human interaction.

Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was writing his famous poem, *Kubla Khan*, that came to him in a dream when he was interrupted by a visitor — a person from Porlock. When Coleridge returned to write, the poem had vanished from his mind. Today, when a 10 minute delay can make our whole day collapse like a set of dominoes, we are less amenable to intrusions and neighbourly visits for the sole purpose of ‘catching up’.

Low tolerance threshold

Rushing through life, we are easily irked by what we perceive as neighbours’ disregard and intrusion of our privacy. Topmost on the list is noise. Kids roller skating inside homes and corridors; grinding and mixer sounds at odd hours; fixing of grills on Sunday afternoons; barking dogs; late-night parties and loud music. Then, there is parking woes. Usurping other people’s parking; blocking the driveway; and generally being a nuisance with loud reverse horns and car alarms that go off at midnight to keep the entire neighbourhood awake. Irresponsible garbage disposal is another pet hate people have against neighbours.

These ‘un-neighbourly’ acts have always existed, what has changed is how quickly and irresponsibly we react to these. Increasingly, we resort to complaints on online RWA forums which cause unnecessary war of words and unbridgeable rifts. It is easy to discuss, fume and vent about the lady upstairs or the man across the street online. But to walk across, knock at a door, have a chat and let the issue slip in does not seem worthwhile anymore. We may not be able to help the drilling noises in our home, but when we inform our neighbours beforehand, they are likely to bear with it more patiently because we have already muffled it with good intent.

We are less tolerant and don’t like mixing with people who are different from us — those whose customs and lifestyle do not match ours. Social interactions revitalise us. Children in mixed neighbourhoods learn kindness and grace. I think my own cross-cultural, and to some extent, varied economic background upbringing in a mixed neighbourhood taught me valuable lessons in civility and in treating others equally. We learned to live

with differences and are the better for it. Neighbourhoods used to be, to a certain extent, class-based, but are now increasingly becoming caste-based too in these uncertain times of fanaticism. The more we strive towards openness and tolerance, the more we regress into narrow-mindedness.

Trust deficit

In times when the government, its agencies, businesses big and small, even hospitals, educational institutions and charities seem to be mired in corruption, cheating and scams, the social environment is such that we view everyone and their motives with suspicion. As a consequence, our social interactions are confrontational.

Also, population is more mobile today — people move from one city to another more readily. Before one gets to know a neighbour, the neighbour moves out. Investing time in building relationships that may not last too long seems like a wasted effort to most. And when we don't know them well-enough, there is no question of trusting neighbours with our house keys — a gesture that in the past sealed the trust between neighbours and was often used as a pretext to reiterate faith and friendship.

The startling rise in not just the rate but also the ferocity of crime in cities is another deterrent. We don't know what is happening behind closed doors, next door. It is a vicious circle where distance creates distrust and distrust increases distance. A lot of our caution may be bordering on paranoia, but we have little to the contrary to persuade us to drop our guards.

Keeping fences low

A truism we are all fond of repeating, “good fences make good neighbours” applies to neighbourly relations, but is not unbending. The poet, Robert Frost, who wrote these lines, was actually quoting his neighbour who was fond of repeating this maxim and Frost questioned his wisdom in following it stringently. He says that the neighbour “moves in darkness”. The poet does not advocate walls between neighbours, “Before I built a wall I'd ask to know/ What I was walling in or walling out, /And to whom I was like to give offence. /Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down...”

In a heart-warming gesture, an older woman in Ahmedabad is reported to have donated her kidney to her young neighbour. On the other hand, recently in Bangalore, a 53-year-old woman, living alone, was found dead in her home. What is shocking is that she had been dead for five months and none of the neighbours knew. Everyone assumed she may have gone somewhere while the woman starved to death in her posh neighbourhood. Such can be the vagaries of urban living. Such are the walls we build.

“We all have neighbours. Greet them on the sidewalk or in the elevator, but try not to peer through their windows. Windows are to look out from, not into.” This advice from Alexandra Stoddard is the crux of good neighbourliness. Intrusion is a relative concept. We are never quite sure where others want the line drawn. When a neighbour we were

not yet introduced with, had a doctor visiting too often, I had to ring their bell and say that I hope I was not intruding, before asking if all was well. Barriers are of our own making.

Excessive formality is also a barrier. One childhood memory is of when I went to call my neighbour to play. She was having her evening snack and I stood around, patiently waiting for her to finish while all the time the taste of her poha and Bournvita swirled into my mouth. Recently, I shared this memory with her sister who was quick to say, “Oh, why didn’t you ask for it, silly girl!” I wonder if the friend had stood on such formality, would it have left me with such a cherished memory.

Technological advances are transforming our lives irrevocably. The easier and faster technology makes communication between people possible, the more difficult and inconvenient it seems for us to make the face to face connect. Like with everything else, this circle of detachment must complete itself. What is critical to our lives and worthwhile must return, sooner than later. Till then, we must try keeping the fences low.
