

Our vanishing public spaces

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My 16-year-old son and I play cricket and football together every weekend. Usually it is just the two of us; occasionally others join in. A couple of years ago, three men in their late twenties wanted to play with us. They looked almost Indian. Their speech gave them away before they told us that they were from Afghanistan. As is our wont, it was us against them, three on two. A tough game lasted 30 minutes with us ahead by a goal. They were thrilled, as were we.

We shook hands and as we parted they said that they were students of the University of Agricultural Sciences (UAS), Bangalore. UAS is better known as Gandhi Krishi Vigyan Kendra (GKVK), which is where we play. After that day, they played with us on many weekends.

GKVK is beautiful. These days it's sparkling yellow with the bloom of yellow tabebuia, this will turn to red with the monsoon bloom of the amaltas, pink in winter with pink tabebuia and purple with jacaranda little later. The 1,600 acre campus has dense tree cover in part, farms (their labs), playgrounds and open spaces. I run in this campus every morning. In fact it is a big part of the reason we live where we do. You will skirt this haven, as you drive in to Bangalore from the airport, but are unlikely to notice it.

On a recent Sunday, four boys wanted to play with us. Their ages seemed to range from 8-12. Two of them had torn shoes, two had no footwear. They played with energy, but with obvious lack of familiarity with a football. My son was very gentle with them, worried they would get hurt.

We couldn't converse fluently; they spoke only a smattering of Hindi, and we don't speak Telugu. We learnt that they lived on a nearby construction site, two of them with some distant relatives and two with their parents. They work from 9am to 9pm and are very happy that they have Sundays off. Two of them used to go to school when they lived in a village near Bellary. They were not 8-12 years old, but 12-16; poor nutrition trumps everything.

They conversed amongst themselves animatedly and then asked us the price of the football. My son told them it was Rs750. Their eyes widened in disbelief. They had intended to buy the ball off us. He gave them the ball and we left. They came running after us screaming in excitement: they wanted me to decide who amongst them would keep the ball.

What is the possibility of a child of upper middle class privilege, like my son, playing football with construction workers or with a bunch of Afghan men? The chances are zero. We live in different worlds in the same city with no common ground. The lack of common ground has complex reasons. One set arises from our impoverished urban environments with no accessible public spaces.

With few notable exceptions, Indian cities have no non-religious, egalitarian public spaces. The few that existed are vanishing and as our cities grow we are not making any attempts to build new ones.

GKVK exemplifies such a public space. That it is beautiful I have already said. They keep it clean, not in a synthetic ornamental way, but like a naturally growing wood. Three other factors make it a vibrant space. It is not ensconced in some posh area: this makes it physically accessible to all. It is not officiously governed and an enlightened choice has been made to let the university grounds be accessible to the public. Having run in more than 100 cities in India, I know how rare that is. Most importantly, it is not cordoned off by social barriers of privilege, felt intuitively and acutely by the less privileged. Construction workers and SUV owners alike use it and neither hesitate to come over.

A city is not its gated communities, but its public spaces. These define the character of any urban environment and connect the people of the city. Since we don't have these, our cities have no (or are losing) character and have no sense of connectedness. Disregard of public spaces is only one aspect of our poor urban development. While we grapple with this complex overall problem, a step forward on the specific issue of public spaces would be if all academic institutions were to throw open their gates and play a role similar to the one like GKVK. One crisp, beautiful Bangalore winter evening, as I shook hands with our Afghan friends, one of them held on to my hand. He looked at my son and said, "You are lucky, you play with your son". It was my Kabuliwala moment. After a few months, we saw them no more at GKVK. I wished then, as now, that they are playing with their sons.

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