

i am not entitled and neither are you - so get over it!



Hardware shop uses road for storage of large water tanks



Vehicles encroaching upon pedestrian crossing



Display counters in veranda outside shop

Every living organism comprises two components: the movable and the immovable. And for the health of the organism, the immovable components must remain relatively fixed, leaving adequate free spaces for their movable counterparts to enjoy smooth mobility. But when the stationary components begin to either spill beyond their ascribed parameters, or garner attachments or augmentations, they begin to encroach upon the empty spaces or passageways, akin to the choking up of arteries in our body.

The Power of Seeing Project is an exercise in detecting factors that lead to chaos in our cities. This column is devoted to the phenomenon of encroachment. We are not including

POWER OF SEEING

Navtej Johar

the legit service-providers like the *dhobi, mochi, sabziwallah*

et cetera, in the list of encroachers, because they have not been allocated any demarcated spaces in our neighborhoods, but pointing to the pervasive tendency to spill beyond our boundaries. Encroachment in our cities can be divided broadly into four categories:

- Encroachment by force or blatant bullying one's way into space (public or private) that is not rightfully one's own and appropriating it for personal use or even acquisition, like squatting or doing *kabza* by force.
- Encroachment through surreptitious occupation or gradually inching one's way to spill beyond one's ascribed boundary into adjoining spaces in order to gain more ground.
- Self-serving encroachment of using or even improvising with the adjoining public spaces to suit one's personal purposes or agendas, and finally,
- Encroachment for the sake of encroachment where a cussed resident may simply block a public space to ensure that if he cannot avail of it, then no one else can!

The reasons for encroachment, thus, could range between pure mal-intent, convenience, lack of concern and plain pettiness, but the common denominating attitude that runs through all these is an attitude of entitlement. Somewhere, something gives us the license to transgress, to exceed beyond our prescribed limits and take advantage. Boundary violations have somehow been naturalised in our society, the social meta-message that guides our conduct and choices is that 'if and where you can, push your luck!' And a sense of entitlement means that we *feel* we have the right and the claim to something more than what is ours, it is through this delusional reasoning that we may even self-validate the act. It is not uncommon to have encroachers dig their heels in and fight for their right to encroach.

Granted that we are a poor, developing and over populated country where space is at a premium, there is perhaps some truth to that this condition gives rise to an anxiety around

material security. But entitlement goes beyond the tangibles of greed or insecurity, it is essentially delusional. In fact, entitlement has a way of morphing itself into self-esteem. Our self-esteem is somehow enhanced if we can push, or we are 'more-than', if we are aggressive.

Pushing and shoving, glaring, blinding high-beam lights at night, or honking the next driver out of existence are not only forms of aggression that we face on a daily level, but they are also blatant forms of encroachment. Encroachment thus is not only a physical obtrusion, but even an intrusion in action. The rich, the poor, the haves, the have-nots all heartily contribute to and participate in this sport of violations. In fact, when getting rides with friends, I am often laughed at and made to feel like a complete sissy for protesting against the use of high beam lights. My own friends, civil, educated, well bred and well meaning, use high-beam lights at night without any qualms. It is quite the done thing!

Encroachment thus is both an attitude as much as it is an action. It is focused only on self-interest without room for care or regard for the other. It is an attitude that imagines that 'I have the right to actually more than what I have', or that 'I matter more than the other', or even that 'I matter most'. And it is not isolated to those few who physically encroach and unlawfully do *kabza* over another's space, but it runs rampant amongst us. When we roll over the zebra crossing at the red light, we are giving in to the impulse to encroach upon the space demarcated for the 'poor' pedestrian who needs to safely cross the road.

Thus the mentality of encroachment runs deep and across the board, in fact may even be defined as a national characteristic. Being a classical dancer, I have to sometimes tease my dancer friends that our culture might not be the lofty ideals of the glorified past, our pretty sculptures and spiritual dances, but the reality that pertains in our streets and public spaces where greed, incivility, aggression and delusion run amok.

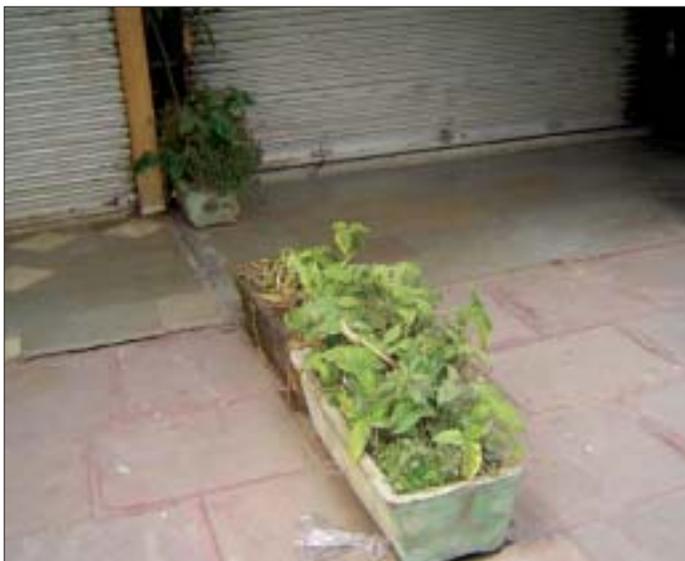
It is important to recognise that given a chance, we will encroach! Whether it is material insecurity and anxiety that prompts us to push our luck, or it is the delusional entitlement or a means to enhance self-esteem, encroachment both compromises our sanity and integrity as well as creates chaos and blockage in our arteries - both literally and metaphorically. We can no longer afford it. It is time to take a reality check and restrict our immovable properties within their ascribed boundaries so that the arteries can flow freely. I am not entitled to encroach and neither are you, so let's get real and get over it!



The Power of Seeing is a Studio Abhyas project initiated by dancer and yoga exponent Navtej Johar. It questions the absence of the human body as a central point of reference in urban design, making our cities inconvenient, unsafe and hazardous. Log onto www.abhyastrust.org.



A blocked pavement: Extending beyond private boundaries



A planter used to further demarcate the space between two shops



Privately installed bollards to further enhance and demarcate shopfront