

A Requiem for the ground

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The Dusshera Ground in the neighborhood is buzzing with activity. The atmosphere is festive with colorful lights, loud music and loads of people. The “Gurgaon Trade Fair” is on. The “trade fair” is less about trade and more about fair. The word *mela* captures its essence better. There are of course shops selling all kinds of everyday goods- from seconds garments to crockery to “genuine Kashmiri shawls”. But the main attractions are the food stalls and the rides for children. The Ferris wheel, the strangely named “Ship of Columbus”, the merry go round with space shuttle shaped cars etc. As expected, the kids love the thrills and one can hear their shrieks from quite a distance.

The ground is a large open space with habitation on all sides. It is routinely used for a variety of activities. In the evenings, one will find several games of cricket going on simultaneously for instance. The younger children would be bullied to play in one of the corners while the prime central location would be usurped by adults. What is amazing is that with all these games going on, there never seems to be any confusion in anyone’s mind about which ball belongs to which game! In other parts of the ground, there would be several people learning to drive the Scootie. One would expect that these would be teenagers but interestingly these are mostly newly married women. Recently, a corner has been taken up by *kabaddi*- a revival which owes much to the commercial *Kabaddi* League. And being the largest open space around, it is also occasionally the site for political rallies as well as religious discourses.

I am reminded of the Central Ground near our house in my childhood. This was, once again, a large unkempt plot of land which served simultaneously as a playground and a place to hang out among other things. The younger children would be playing cricket, *gulli danda* and even volleyball while the older ones would be just hanging around chatting or surreptitiously indulging in forbidden pastimes like smoking or discussing their latest love interest. The ground would also be the training site for many of my friends who were trying to get into the Army or the police. They could be seen jogging around the perimeter to train for endurance. And yes, it hosted the Dusshera celebrations as well as an annual *mela* on Rakshabandhan.

It is rare to find these kinds of spaces nowadays- spaces which are not “maintained” or beautified; spaces which are not restricted and genuinely open; spaces which do not have a predefined purpose. Typically, these would be originally reserved for a playground or in some cases, a school or some other community building. However, somewhere down the line, because of bureaucratic incompetence or lack of funds, the project never gets completed. This is clear from the remains of what must have been a boundary wall at some point of time but would serve as a convenient perch for teenagers as well as a source of bricks to serve as wickets for cricket.

Of course there are huge *maidans* in several cities which do serve the same purpose. The Ramlila Maidan as well as the Subhash Park near Jama Masjid in Delhi, Shivaji Park in Mumbai, the Maidan in Kolkata, the Gandhi Maidan in Patna for instance. But normally because of their size and location, they are anonymous spaces- the neighborhood ground on the other hand is simultaneously anonymous and intimate. And that is what makes it unique.

Instead what is increasingly happening is the proliferation of parks and gyms. The parks are usually well maintained, with beds of seasonal flowers, manicured grass and cobbled footpaths around the perimeter with signs all over warning people not to bring dogs or play on the grass. Occasionally one would also find a children’s corner with the usual jungle gyms, swings and slides. These parks of course serve a vital need for very small children as well as safe places for senior citizens to meet or walk or have communal yoga classes. But they don’t allow for unstructured and unrestricted activities- the grass is typically out of bounds for cricket or sometimes even for walking. The gyms on the other hand are restricted to those who can afford to pay.

In the Dusshera Ground, the crowd going to the *mela* is quite heterogeneous. One sees young women in their best clothes, walking excitedly behind their husbands. They are typically migrants who work odd jobs and live in the neighborhood slum. The entrance has many hawkers selling *chaat*, burgers, momos and the curiously named, “Famous Palwal Pasta”. One can also spot a teenaged boy and girl looking around for some dark corner to enjoy each other’s company- a forbidden activity ordinarily around these parts. And then there are the middle class families loaded with bags full of bargains they have managed to get at the stalls in the fair.

This egalitarian and democratic, almost anarchic ethos is what is special about the neighborhood ground. It is something which cannot be achieved by making community sports centers or public gyms where even though entry might be notionally free, it is always de facto restricted. By all means build more gyms and sports centers and well maintained public parks- but do leave empty spaces, which can be used without any predefined purpose by the citizens as they deem fit.

Shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com

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