

Despite structural inequality, small acts of kindness have value

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Pandit ji looked very worried. His eyes were searching the dense foliage which overhung the high wall and he was making sounds which one normally makes to summon an animal. In the end, he just gave up and went back home. Another effort to locate the cat he had been feeding daily for months had failed.

The cat had been coming every day at around 630pm and waiting at a specific spot on the wall for Pandit ji to come with the food. Pandit ji would leave the food and the cat would come down, eat and leave. But now for several days the cat was not coming and Pandit ji was distraught. He feared that a rogue dog that had recently been seen in the neighborhood had killed it.

Pandit ji is a man of modest means who makes his living from officiating at weddings and funerals and other ceremonies. And yet, for the cat, he ensures that there is always branded cat food. The reason, as he told me is that cats are non-vegetarians and so need their quota of meat. He is obviously a strict vegetarian and thus to ensure that the cat gets a balanced meal, he buys a big bag of cat food.

A lot of people in my neighbourhood feed stray dogs and many more feed stray cows. Normally the animals are given the extra chapattis which are left over from the previous meal and hence these acts of kindness seem to incur little cost. But in the case of Pandit ji, the bag of expensive cat food is obviously an expense which must be stretching his modest income. And yet he does it.

Another person whom I regularly see during my evening walk is a lady who distributes sweets to small children of the people working at construction sites. She goes every evening to the market, buys a large amount of toffees and hard boiled sweets and then goes from one construction site to another in the neighbourhood to give these to the children. The joyous faces of the children on the construction site on getting the two toffees is possibly the only reward the lady wishes for. Unlike Pandit ji, the lady does not appear to be lacking in means to afford this small expense. But come rain or shine, she makes this trip every evening.

Why is it that some people go through such trouble to do these acts which can only be described as acts of kindness to strangers? What could possibly be the motivation for people to perform these acts at some cost to themselves?

Religion provides one motivation. It provides a robust framework for ethical behavior when it comes to fellow humans and in some cases, to all living beings. All religions have stressed the importance of helping others in need- whether it is the feeding of the hungry outside a temple, or hospitals run by the church or the mandatory *zakat* prescribed by Islam. Thus for most believers, gaining religious merit is motivation enough. However, it is not as if they do a mental calculation of merits - a certain kind of behavior become a way of life and comes naturally from years of internalizing the ethical framework provided by their religion.

Those of us, who consider ourselves belonging to the agnostic or atheist camp, do not subscribe to this ethical calculus. And so, not for us the simple joy of doing something which will at least bring temporary relief or joy to those in need. We would rather wax eloquent on the grand narrative of systemic failure, the political economy of capitalism and its attendant inequalities, or the organized beggar mafia etc. And then there are those who have convinced themselves of a contorted version of the survival of the fittest- the unfortunate ones are simply not good enough and so deserve their lot or worse, are indolent.

Of course our society is highly unequal and no amount of, what is disparagingly called do-gooding, will bring about any significant structural change. But does that mean that one doesn't do small acts which can bring a little joy, no matter how fleetingly, to those who are not as fortunate as us?

Then one evening I saw Pandit ji standing near the wall and pleading with the cat to come down and eat. The cat had returned but for some reason was diffident to come down from her safe perch even to eat. Pandit ji tried to convince the cat for some time and then finally just left the food and went away. Moments later I saw the cat come down and polish off the food. Across the road at the construction site though, the children were still waiting since the lady with the goodies was late today.

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