

“Kahin bekhayaal ho kar, yun hi choo liya kisi ne ,Kai khwaab dekh dale, yahan meri bekhudi ne”. The seductive voice of Rafi and Majrooh’s inimitable lyrics in Teen Deviyān poignantly captured the innocence of those times. That was 1965. One can think of several songs from that era which convey the electrifying feeling of an accidental touching of hands. Recall Rajendra Kumar as an overgrown student accidentally bumping into a burqa clad Sadhna and then both picking up the fallen books and their hands touching in Mere Mehboob – *“meri rag rag me koi barq si lehrayi thi jab tere marmari hathon ko chhua tha maine”*.

The sense of touch is, surprisingly, somewhat underappreciated. Biologically it, like all other senses works by a combination of sensors and neural pathways and processing in the brain. The mechanoreceptors in the skin respond to differences in pressure etc. on the skin to detect the stimulus like touching a table or shaking a person’s hand. The neural pathways then convey this information to the brain where the electrical signal is processed into information. And this is where issues become complicated.

The information is processed in two different ways. The first or the primary information about the properties of the signal, namely things like pressure, temperature, location, texture etc. is processed in the primary somatosensory cortex in the brain. However, certain kinds of contact with a foreign surface, say with another human being also stimulates another part of the brain called the anterior cingulate cortex. This is where the touch is placed in a social and emotional context. Thus, the exact same physical stimulus might produce a totally different sensation depending on the emotional and social context. Shaking hands with a long lost friend and with Donald Trump might trigger totally different emotions though the stimulus intensity might be the same.

The biology and psychology is well known and understood. Using a variety of tools, like fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) to detect which part of the brain is stimulated by what kind of stimulus etc., a fairly good understanding of the somatosensory system (as it is technically known) has developed in the last few decades.

However, it is the cultural aspect of this profoundly important sense that is even more interesting. One of the first things I noticed when I went to the United States as a student in the early 1980s was that how paranoid people were about touch- and this was not just with strangers but even among friends. You just didn’t touch anyone- not even in a friendly way. It was as if, like the reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes, everyone had a phobia of touch.

This was odd for a person who grew up in a society where you would routinely walk with your arms around your best friend’s shoulder. Incidentally, here too, this particular social trait seems to have died out. Of course the social life of a child today is radically different from what I experienced. Television and digital devices are fast making children more solitary.

Interestingly, even now, I still see this old fashioned show of camaraderie in slum clusters and semi-rural areas. Boys and even men walk with arms around each other while curiously, teenage girls walk holding each other's fingers!

Of course the free use of the sense of touch was restricted to the same sex. Once you crossed adolescence, there were anyway few opportunities of any interaction with the opposite sex. Even later, in college when one started being friends with women, the inhibition about touch was strong. Touch equalled romantic engagement.

This is another thing that seems to have changed hugely in the intervening 3 decades. Even if one was romantically engaged with another person, public displays of affection (holding hands for instance) were just not done. Displays of affection were confined to secluded gardens, dark restaurants and cinema halls. Interestingly, this was as true of much-in-love college going teenagers as of married couples.

In contrast, it is normal now to see a couple walking with the male hand firmly clasping the female one. Holding hands might be kosher but anything more to show one's affection is still not done. Maybe it is the influence of liberalised television or films which has brought about this change but change it certainly is. This was brought home to me the other day when I spotted two couples walking down the road. In one case, it was a daily wager couple walking back from a construction site with their infant. As has always been the case, the man carried the child in his arms and walked ahead while the woman walked about two steps behind, carrying a huge load of firewood scrounged from various places, for the evening meal. In the other case, it was a young couple where the man, though also an economic migrant seemed to be slightly up the economic ladder, maybe a courier or delivery boy. And they were walking very much hand in hand. It was then that I realised that this loss of inhibition is not confined to the so-called educated, westernised elite.

Heterosexual touch in public thus seems to be fast losing its taboo status. This of course is a good thing. Evolution of retrograde social mores which encourage psychological repression of desires is a good thing in itself. The exquisite poetry which an accidental trespassing of that taboo inspired is something else though. Somehow, Honey Singh and Baby Doll seem to be poor replacements for the likes of Majrooh and Shakeel.

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