





Source: Karin Schlierhold, Ian Nazareth

CLOUDSPOTTING AT MAHALAXMI

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Mr Singhanian, with all due respect, sir, this is in response to your ludicrous idea about turning the city's most valuable and therapeutic green space into a theme park and hotel to pay off a dysfunctional state government's bad debt. I have been going to the Mahalaxmi racecourse for over 20 years—to walk, amble, run, run away, reboot, or just lie on the grass and do some cloudspotting. Of late, I take my five-year-old son, who believes he is a warrior prince, and we spend time in the horse enclosure, dreaming of the day he will gallop across the world, and destroy the 'bad people'. I have seen the same people come there, every evening, year after year. It's a strange kind of intimacy—to grow old together, even though you have never spoken a word. Based on this sacred relationship I have with this space, I believe I have the right to voice my opinion on this matter as much as any policy-maker who may or may not have been there.

The racecourse is one of the few spaces in the city where sky is the great leveller. Let me describe a scene which took place only last weekend. I had finished my run around the track, and strolled into the lovely landscaped garden where my son was playing. I found him chatting with a little boy. A few feet away, keeping an eye on the child, sat a man who may have been a taxi driver. I crept up behind the two children to eavesdrop on their conversation. They were speculating on the shape of a cloud which they both felt looked like a lion.

“Like the one in Madagascar,” my son said.
“No, like the one in Rani Bagh,” said the little boy.
“What’s Rani Bagh?” my son asked.
“Where all the animals live. What’s Madagascar?”
“It’s a movie.”
“Oh.”

They stared intently at the cloud some more. Then, the little boy got up and ran off. They didn't bother asking each other names, where they lived, which school they went to, or what their daddies did. Their paths were not likely to cross again, but they had formed a connection over a cloud, which may or may not settle into their unconscious, and reemerge years later in the form of a poem or a kind gesture.

The race course is a space for accidental interactions, which is important in a society that is already stratified along class and religious lines. It offers unlimited oxygen regardless of who you are, or how you spend your day. I always like to form a story behind the person whom I see walking briskly, or lazing on the grass. The dark teenage boy with streaked hair could be the son of the imam at the nearby mosque. The compulsive runner may be a desperate housewife from Breach Candy. The rotund regular may be a BMC employee from the nearby quarter, making up for a hopeless day at work. The Labrador may be thanking his doggy stars that he is out of his 1000-sq-ft apartment.

Medical research increasingly reveals that those who are exposed to nature, recover from stress far sooner than those who are not. One study found that hospitalised patients whose windows look out at a natural landscape, recovered from surgery more quickly than those who do not have access. In an article in the Wall Street Journal, Michael Waldholz, a health care and bioscience reporter, wrote, “A growing body of evidence suggests that humans are hardwired not just to enjoy a pleasant view of nature, but to actually exploit it, much like a drug, to relax and refresh after a stressful experience. Simply viewing a garden or another natural vista can quickly reduce blood pressure and pulse rate, and can even increase brain activity that controls mood-lifting feelings.”

It is not surprising that the racecourse garden, lined with bursts of gorgeous flowers, has been sponsored by an edible oils company. It recognises the value of wellness. Harvard zoologist Edward O Wilson has written reams about 'biophilia', which is people's genetic affinity to respond positively to nature. Ancient civilisations recognised this need—judging by the care with which they built gardens all around them. Wilson writes, in his book, Biophilia (1984): “The one process now going on that will take millions of years to correct is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us.”

It's bad karma, Mr Singhanian. Besides, where will you go when you want to take off in a hot air balloon?





