A Gym-side View



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Most people sign up to lose a few, here's someone who gained some. An insider's account

MIDWEEK MUSINGS

The songs playing one after another do not jog the ear anymore. I am not sure when I learnt to tune out the *dus bahanes* — no offence — and treat the beats and tunes as background score as I pedal, push and lunge.

In between "sets" of workouts comes the invariable interjection — "Did you see the pictures I WhatsApped you" or "My daughter's placement interview is next week. We are praying she gets Gurgaon and not Bengaluru". The conversation initiators do not seem to notice that I am out of breath pushing a 7.5kg weight first up, then down, then further down to the floor or doing the kettlebell and looking ridiculous at that.

I am by now quite familiar with this set of people who come to work out in the late-evening slot. The high school boy who has been building muscles for a year now. The doctor posted in North Bengal who comes in only when she can. The senior citizen with bobbed silver hair is building stamina before some procedure she doesn't want to elaborate on.

Some of them I know by face alone. There are mother-in-law/daughter-in-law pairs, young couples, middle-aged couples and one or two soon-to-be-couples. Sharing space every other day, I have some idea who does what for a living, who is friends with who, and idiosyncrasies.

I know when X walks in looking party perfect that she will settle down on an idle treadmill, sipper, bag et al and spend a fair bit of an hour talking on the phone. I know by now that the two mothers lying on adjacent yoga mats are discussing pre-boards exhaustion — theirs. I watch in wonderment the bank executive who comes in only now and then, and does only the treadmill for close to an hour.

All of this is punctuated with fierce guttural sounds emanating from those lifting weights.

The PTs or personal trainers, when they are not hovering around the trainees — doing the count, piling on the weights — invariably gather in front of the hanging television sets watching some sport or the other, cheering some team or the other. Their enthusiasm is infectious. I am told one or two of them had harboured athletic dreams...

The whole experience has an OTT quality right down to their episodic nature, complete with changing seasons.

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Everyone, I assume, has more or less the same reasons for joining a gym. It is the impetus to keep returning that varies.

I had joined after a routine annual health checkup. An amber flag started the waterworks at home. No one had faith in my promises to walk or diet. And so, for the sake of world peace, I walked to the nearest gym and got myself enrolled.

It felt awkward at first. The only gym I had been inside was a good decade and a half ago and it had been an office gym at that. My fellow gymmers were people I knew, people I worked with. Most importantly, I was then young and not at all self-conscious. This time round, I was all of those things with a couple of dozen kilos thrown in.

For the middle-aged gym-goer, surviving that first day is crucial. The space itself can overwhelm with all its equipment and weights, the loud music, the painfully young people in natty gym wear and accessories moving like trapeze artistes and making reels, of themselves, at the same time. At the end of Day 1, I was not sure I could sustain this, but as I saw it I had to wring the most out of the monthly subscription. And so I stuck on.

If you can make yourself do this for a month, chances are you will last a while; provided the place is well run and has the right mix of members. Some of my fellow gymmers have been doing this for years. "Ten years," said one of them. Others take intermittent breaks. I don't see them for months, and then one day they roll in looking very fit or very fat. The first set works out with their PT supervising virtually! Many of them just walk in and spend close to two or more hours pottering around. Some of them don't seem to get any trimmer. On weekends, the place turns into a babysitting space. Sometimes I just stop doing the leg raise or the squat or the plank and just lie still or stand still, and absorb this sense of community.

At the end of Month 3, a "gym friend" invited me to an exhibition and I learnt her name. By Month 6, I knew some names and could go beyond pleasantries. That seemed enough.

In a scattered world, most old friendships flourish or not on WhatsApp. Making new friends with enough boundaries post-50 is something of a unicorn unless you are a smoker. Somehow I have never succeeded as a morning walker, so no laughing club friends for me. The tea stall *adda* has been swallowed whole by the whimsical weather pattern and with it all those possibilities.

But in this gym I have found my public park and sense of community, informal yet not familiar; new but with some old decorum in place; a shuffling and therefore not stifling company. For close to a waking hour every other day I am off the hand-held...

It's been months since I got on a weighing scale, so shoot me.

OUR BUREAU