

In Praise of Good Manners

By Devika Kumar

It was sometime in 1958 that I first came to Delhi with Dad and Mum on one of my father's official tours from what was at the time, small town Jaipur. I was all of six years old and considered myself an extremely knowledgeable person. Till Dad took us to Standard restaurant.

The good old place has since closed down, but then it was a place of fascination. A brass band played at one end and the lights, dazzling on the white table cloths and gleaming on the cutlery and crystal made my heart swell with the glory of it all. And then we settled down, tenderly attended by waiters and someone who reminded me of the majesty of the *Rajwadas*! My legs dangled a good one and a half feet away from the floor.

I looked at the table and lost my nerve: for there, lined up with the precision of troops, were spoons and forks and knives and glasses – all of different shapes! What was one to do with so much abundance? I watched Daddy pick up the soup spoon and hunted frantically among the array around my plate. Found it! How did one sip the soup without slurping it? The soup was very hot!

The waiters came and, like the movements of a graceful dance, the soup plates vanished and warmed plates were placed in front of us. Empty! They began to serve from the dishes held in delicate balance. How did they manage to hold a fork and a spoon in one hand? I'd have dropped the whole thing! Then one faced the spoons and forks and knives again, and how did one ask for water? Why didn't they simply pour it into one of the glasses? Oh, dear!

I found Daddy smiling at me over his glasses. He showed me the fork and spoon he had picked up and I followed him. Mum grinned at the two of us; she was quite comfortable with a spoon.

Now I had a major doubt about all this.

"Daddy, how do I know what's right and what's not when I'm not with you?"

"Easy!" replied Daddy. "Just be considerate to people around you, and you will never make a mistake!"

Daddy passed away almost forty years ago and till date I have not found a better definition for good behaviour! It is not about Emily Post. She wouldn't be valid among the variety of people and customs obtaining across the world. But Dad's one-liner would stand the heat!

I look at the inconsiderate drivers on the roads, let alone the ones who indulge in road-rage, spitting and the abusive ones. I have seen a very senior officer prod his grown-up daughter, who teaches in a prestigious college, to wish his colleagues! There are the deodorised and gelled salespersons who look down their noses at customers who are not 'just so', imitating the supercilious stares of camels. And of course, the inevitable, "Do you know who I am?" when I try to find parking space for my humble Wagon-R. I see the neighbour who turns cantankerous when the lady downstairs requests them to stop dragging sofas across the floor every day. A chiffon-and-lipstick-clad young matron languidly telling her little son who is effectively demolishing your drawing room and crockery, "Beta, be a good boy! Children are

so full of beans!" And your nails are curling into your palms, itching to spank him soundly! And the mobile-and-selfie brigade that infests every corner of the world now. How does one tell them that they are not the life and soul of the party?

And the individual's bad behaviour has spilt over into all of our public life. Watch the so-called debates on TV channels. Common sense has often been replaced by strident voices attempting to out-shout each other. Rudeness has been formulated into an art! Political meetings turn into a free-for-all slanging matches and the conduct of those in places of power sometimes leaves me wondering how they face each other with such equanimity at dinners and on Page 3! Protests decide culture by destruction of public property – an ideal example of cutting one's nose to spite one's face. And disputes are settled not by civilised discussions or legal debate but by the violence of immediate revenge! A minor symptom is revealed when a pedestrian leaps in front of a vehicle from a road divide or a bush and glares with a tremendous sense of entitlement.

These are just a few illustrations of the extremes to which lack of consideration has carried us. And every time I see a polite driver or shopkeeper, a courteous man or woman, a child with good manners, a parent who teaches the child to behave with consideration, I am reminded of Daddy's words. The basis of good manners cannot be drilled into us except by the courtesies we practise, the basic consideration that we extend to friends and strangers.