

# They are one of us, too

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A friend related how at a government-run health clinic where he was required to take shots before travelling abroad, he was exposed to untold risks at the hands of health workers who went to the extent of breaking open the injection vial with a scooter key lying about.

We can get angry, fight, complain, but why is it that these things never change? Why is it that the lady cleaning the corridors leaves patches of the floor unswept and dirt in corners? Why is it that the nurse is callous while doing a dressing? Why is the clerk in a government office unwilling to settle a small issue sending one into a spiral of red tape?

They seem indifferent and difficult. But what about us who only notice them when they slip or are 'absent' from work? If the garbage collectors go off work for a day, we cannot breathe as rubbish piles up at street corners; in many metros, as in Bangalore, lives come to a standstill if the water tanker suppliers' wilful demands are not met; in homes, we cannot seem to function without the help of maids, drivers and istriwalas.

Yet, we look down upon their work; resist their assertion of rights, forming of unions, even a group to protect their rights; grudge them time-offs; expect them to wear our old clothes and shoes; buy off at half price our outdated appliances; and feel let down when

they decide to move on in order to improve their station in life.

We would like not to engage with them and yet want them to function with machine-like precision so our lives may run smoothly. They are the invisible people who we treat with apathy and often, much disdain, but whose services we cannot live without.

We may posture as liberal and unbiased, but we remain at core a classist society and whatever we may say to counter it, in our minds we still hold people in their 'correct' social places so that the jigsaw of our public life does not appear jumbled. So, when a street kid enters the world's largest fast food chain, we don't know what to do.

The doorman, unsure of which side of the plate glass doors that he holds open, he himself belongs, scampers to save his job, and does what he thinks best to keep the area 'sanitised' for the privileged. Wasn't that his job in the first place? The unspoken responsibility his duty demands? Why else do we have doormen if not to keep 'certain' people out? Isn't that what 'right to admission reserved' really implies?

When the woman who has accompanied the kid inside cries foul, the social media goes into hyper drive to roll eyes and condemn. Each one of us feels obliged to involve ourselves with the issue even though we know it is commonplace. Our five-minutes of dinner time eyebrow-raising changes nothing. Things stay as they were — status quo. Except, perhaps, the bewildered doorman may have been reprimanded or worse, shown the door.

### Recognition & appreciation

I remember an incident from early childhood when a family friend visiting from the US was returning. She was leaving our small town by train and there was a gathering of people come to see her off. As the train began to chug away, she stood at the door waving at us.

Noticing the driver of the car that had brought her and some of the party to the station standing a little away, she waved out to him. I still remember the elders talking about it days later. They thought it amusing and somewhat wanton. Drivers are there to drive cars and not to 'engage' with the employers in other ways. Their presence need not be acknowledged.

Studies show that it is not the fear of losing job but appreciation by the bosses that motivates employees to work harder and better. The top reasons why people are bored with their jobs are because their jobs are not challenging enough; they need more responsibility; and seek opportunities that will allow them to grow. So it is hardly surprising that this section of people have little motivation to do their work well when no one seems to recognise or appreciate their efforts.

When we see a garden blooming, lovingly cared for, we take pictures to share with friends — our friends, people in our social circle. Do we ever go to the gardener and tell him what a wonderful job he is doing? We only complain and report him when we think he is not.

When do we send out a box of mithai to a clerk and not their boss when our important work comes through? When do we ever return to thank a nurse who has extended care beyond her call of duty during our time in hospital? Regrettably, we don't even know them by their names.

Most parents teach their kids to address elders with respect. So we have them call elders 'uncle' and 'aunty'. But we never squirm when little children address this workforce around us as 'watchman', 'driver' or 'maid'. When a plumber, electrician or carpenter is unable to fix our problem, we feel cheated and frustrated. Do we stop to consider that maybe the problem isn't with them, but with us who want to pay these handymen as little as possible? For the money we are ready to part with, these workmen or the agencies that hire them for us do not find training economical. So we have an army of half-skilled, unmotivated workers that expose our lives to unnecessary hassles and risks.

The rights of this section of workers are not protected by law and they are most often not entitled to any employment benefits like paid leaves for sickness or maternity, job security, pension, health insurance or opportunities to grow. It is not surprising that 'trade/workers unions' have become a frightening word for the people on the other side and there is resistance from the employers to let workers organise themselves thus. This makes them retaliate in ways big and small to wield their power when they can. When a clerk, frustrated with his job that neither fulfils his needs nor his heart, sees how we're at the mercy of his assistance, he shows us who is in command by making things tough for us.

### Dignity & humility

On a sweltering summer afternoon, we were pulled over by a traffic cop. Irritated because we knew we had not broken any rule, I rolled the window down only to be asked if I could give him some water to drink. How we fume at the traffic policemen when they hold us up. We can never appreciate their tough working conditions — constantly on the alert in the midst of dust and smoke in harsh weather with no water or washroom facility for hours together.

Many drivers and house maids have no washroom facilities in swank apartment, commercial and office complexes. The thought does not cross the minds of those that build nor those of us that live or work here. It is not economical to invest in such. Their everyday needs are beyond our reckoning. A house-help told me about how dirty the family she worked previously with left the dishes for her to wash. Smearred with gravies and leftovers that turned putrid by the time she cleaned, she was often left nauseated. Would we leave them so if one of us had to clean the dishes? These things happen all the time and we stay smug in our pocket of indifference.

In any service or customer-facing enterprise, the customer's feel-good factor is critical. It is the attention to detail that mainly this staff takes care of that makes all the difference to our experience. It is this workforce that creates the first impressions of a place — the

house-help who opens the door to greet us, brings a glass of water with a smile; the obliging receptionist at an office or hospital; the attentive waiter at our restaurant table.

I was amused to see the remains of a price sticker clinging to the bottom of not one but two glasses at a luxury hotel. Millions can be spent on facilities, but the customer can be put off by ill-mannered, uninvolved, untrained and unskilled staff; by negligence in small places. To keep them motivated to do their jobs well, we need to treat them with dignity and humility.

Every talk on dignity of work begins and ends with us citing Mahatma Gandhi's advocacy to clean toilets. Those were the days of manual carrying away and cleaning of the chamber pots. Gandhiji advocated it because that one task that made a whole 'class' untouchable, strips one completely of the ego. Modern day flush toilets, quite often one per person, do not demand any such exertion of the ego.

In a more democratic set-up where the social lines are blurred on the surface although they may run deep in our minds, according dignity to each person doing any work that we may consider 'lowly', and treating each with humility, is how our egos will be kept in check. There are people trying to make a living at street corners by handing us pamphlets; asking us to fill questionnaires; or those that come knocking at the door at three in the afternoon selling four-for-the-price-of-one encyclopaedias; sanitary napkins; home-made pickles and hand-embroidered bed sheets.

Most often, they are irritants in our 'on demand' living that stipulates that the service that we need reaches us when we want, and without-hassle. The 'without-hassle' would imply among other things that it should not involve dealing with people whom we consider below our station.

Treating the lowest labour at work with humility and allowing them to improve and acquire new skills and grow is according dignity to labour. The cook in the house wanted to learn to bake a cake, but the cautious neighbour sounded the bell, "Don't teach her that! Next house she goes to work in, she'll ask for more money saying she can also bake." And, why not? Hasn't she acquired a new skill? Doesn't she deserve to do well? How can we deny them what we want for ourselves?

### Persistent paradoxes

'Tolerance' is a nasty word used most annoyingly to assert our liberal outlook. Why should we tolerate people, differences, new ideas, a fresh perspective or changes? We need to do better. We need to embrace and support these wholeheartedly. In a democratic society, everyone has the opportunity to thrive and succeed; and they have the right to not be judged poorly for what is beyond their control like their socio-economic background or status.

"A daughter-in-law is to be treated as a member of the family with warmth and affection and not as a stranger with respectable and ignoble indifference. She should not be treated as a house maid. No impression should be given that she can be thrown out of her

matrimonial home at any time...” This, according to media reports, was the observation made by the country’s top court while sentencing a man for torturing his wife which led her to commit suicide.

What does it mean? How ‘can’ a house maid be treated? Can she be thrown out of the house anytime? This is the disadvantage they live with. Our prejudices run deep. We reveal our constricted mindset in subtle and not so subtle ways. In a face-off between a house maid and an envoy, is it a surprise that the nation sides with the envoy even before the details of the case are before us, even before the maid’s side of the story is heard? Our preoccupation with ‘our’ class has us fuming over the injustice done to ‘one of us’.

The stereotypical mindset believes that the maid must be at fault because we have imbibed the notion that ‘these people’ are conniving and out to cheat us. Just as half-hearted and slipshod work is rejected with reprimand, every effort to improve and excel has to be recognised and appreciated.

It may cause a slight societal still surface disturbance when we step out of our sanitised bubbles to tell the kitchen help that the cup of coffee is the best; thank the liftman and smile at the lady sweeping the corridor; reply to the doorman’s greeting; and ask the courier guy if he would like some water. It is time we started noticing those standing in the sidelines, those that we would rather not see or hear. It is time to feel with sincerity the work they do and accord them recognition and appreciation.

I’m still thinking of this piece as I step into the food court of an upmarket mall. Seated next to me is a family of four — young parents and teenage daughters. The girls are holding in their intricately nail-arted hands elaborate swirls of coned ice-creams and licking away nonchalantly as a maid — a girl also their age — sits a little away smiling away her awkwardness. No, she’s not having an ice cream. Should I take consolation in the fact that she’s allowed to sit at the same table?