

Grace under fire

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In the mad rush to win the race of life, courtesy and politeness are given the short shrift. Getting ahead by any means has become more important than acting with grace. Shefali Tripathi Mehta holds a mirror up to our society where refinement, elegance, thoughtfulness and kindness have lost their value.

Every evening, a bunch of kids — boys aged seven to nine — come to play near my window. It is the hour of the day I dread. It's not the noise — the happy chatter of kids is quite mood-elevating and nostalgia-evoking. It's the nature of the noise. The children are abusive and expletives that many adults will cringe from using slide off their tongues with such ease that I am stunned. The other thing I notice is that they don't appear happy playing together. Each one is primarily concerned with wrangling control over others. The timid ones are alienated and bear the brunt of the offensive behaviour.

A new TV and print advertisement has a prominent toothpaste brand run down another popular brand, brazenly displaying the product and its name. Advertising wars are not uncommon, but such unveiled attacks were rare till recently.

Karan Thapar and his television show, the Devil's Advocate, known for aggressive attacks on guests on the show, used to be an exception, and most people unaware that the format was its chief differentiator, were appalled by his rudeness. Today, every news debate borders on the offensive. No principle or social compunction stops politicians, celebrities, leaders, lawyers — the pillars of our society — from maligning, bad-mouthing, casting aspersions on others to win the war of words.

This aggressive behaviour that we see in our daily dealings slowly corrodes our sensibilities and sensitivity and leads us to a point where crassness does not only stop bothering us, but even seems legit for ends we wish to achieve. The line between being strong and compelling and being abusive and derisive has certainly blurred. Today we don't raise eyebrows when people are rude and irreverent because it is commonplace. Courtesy and politeness are given the short shrift. In the mad race to stay ahead, we compromise on refinement, elegance, thoughtfulness, courtesy and kindness.

Idols fail us

Frustrated by the unruly behaviour of the parliamentarians inside the Indian Parliament that was once hailed as the 'temple of democracy', the Vice-President and Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, Hamid Ansari, called it a 'Federation of Anarchists'. Besides the code of conduct that is imparted to all newly-elected Members of Parliament which includes injunctions against speaking out of turn, shouting slogans, waving placards, and marching into the well of the house, these elected representatives of the people are expected to uphold some finer human qualities like courtesy and respect for each other. Even children on school trips to the Parliament have often been amused by the scenes inside. One school kid is reported to have remarked, "We also have verbal duels in school, but a little more disciplined".

Recently, the gentleman's game was shamed in its parent country when the English cricket team celebrated their Ashes win by urinating on the cricket pitch at the Oval, and Miley Cyrus, the Hanna Montana idol of an entire generation, twerked to pander to vulgar tastes and gain publicity. Innocent schoolgirls will soon be dressed in flesh coloured underclothes and flash foam fingers at fancy dress competitions.

The deterioration of values in public life and how idols behave is only a reflection of the society we live in. When a child says he wants to be a Captain Dhoni of the Indian cricket team when he grows up, does anyone tell him that he must also follow the fine human qualities of Dhoni? That by not hogging the limelight Dhoni does not forfeit the credit due to him as the captain of the winning team? Does it miss our attention that Dhoni lets the younger, newer players hold and pose with the winning trophies and bask in the glory of a win?

False focus

The burgeoning middle class with increased disposable incomes and its preoccupation with earning well, moving up the social ladder, being able to 'afford' things may have in many ways contributed to the loss of finer acquisitions in life. Growing up, I used to hear

this praise often, always in context of young men — ‘self-made’. It meant that the person referred to got to their position in life on their own merit and hard work, not on the crutches of family wealth or name. The realisation that ‘self-made’ was used only in connection with the socio-economic status — earns well, owns a house, car — that it had little to do with the ‘person’ accomplishments of kindness, courtesy, graciousness and humility, dawned later.

In the commerce of life, there is little place for thoughtfulness. Benefits are to be derived by flattery and fawning over, and lead to all forms of corruption. Numbers, targets, profits — these are factors that define today’s work culture. Results drive us. Competition keeps us going. And this spills over in our social lives too. *Bhala uski kameez meri kameez se safed kaise?* becomes the maxim we live by. So we have parents confronting teachers with ‘how come the other child has got two marks more than mine?’ And so we ignore the woman carrying a crying baby at the billing counter instead of allowing her to go first. We talk on phones during films and concerts.

At an amusement park, as kids scampered towards a ride, they broke the queue and rushed to get in the front, pushing others out of their way. When a couple asked their daughter to stay in the queue, they were chided by friends who told them that in today’s world it is necessary to show some aggression to stay ahead. Otherwise, she will always be a loser, the parents were cautioned.

Let’s sensitise ourselves

Deepika Kumari, the resilient 19-year old, archer extraordinaire, Arjuna Award winner, currently ranked number two in the world, who grew from aiming stones at mangoes, daughter of a rickshaw driver father and a medical nurse mother, burst into tears when the media accused her of being arrogant for not speaking with them. That the media could not appreciate her sterling qualities or the circumstances of the overwrought teenager, but engage with her only at a ‘news story’ level is the telling sign of what we have become. Our self-preoccupation blinds us so that we are unable to see things from a perspective other than ours.

A friend describes an unpleasant dining experience in a restaurant with a group including an autistic child. The child who made a humming sound to soothe himself was rudely confronted by a man at the next table who asked the child to ‘stop the noise’ because it was disturbing him. To all present, the condition of the child was evident and it only required a little consideration for the parents and the child from the fellow diner to show some tolerance.

In another incident, an autistic teenager who needed a passport photo was refused entry into a photo studio, even though he was accompanied by his mother.

No Dr Jekyll turns Mr Hyde overnight. Aren’t kindergarten bullies more likely to grow up to rag others in college and become rude bosses? This September, a 13-year-old Bangalore boy, a class eight student, ridiculed by classmates for failing to make it to NCC as he was

underweight and emaciated, committed suicide by hanging himself in his residence. There are hundreds who have lost their lives to mindless ragging in colleges and hundreds who bear the scars of it for life.

Measure of man

We were just finishing our meal at a restaurant when a group of fashionable women arrived with kids and maids — girls barely 9 and 12. The women and their children were seated at a table. The maids remained standing, looking about self-consciously as the waiters attended to the seated diners, ignoring them. It was obvious that the maids would not be eating there.

That they would be standing, feeding their charges, accompanying them to the washrooms and picking up after them. In a similar incident, a woman at a store, who seemed particularly irritated with everything from the quality of Australian plums to the slowness of the billing clerk, finished billing, and as she walked out, the guard at the exit asked to see her bill. It enraged her so much that she scrunched the bill and threw it at his face before stomping out. The guard just looked away. I guess it wasn't the first time.

Would the woman do this at a high-end restaurant? Would she throw a tantrum for being screened at the hotel entrance? Why do we think it okay to treat those below us in social standing with disdain? The hugely reported case of the doctor couple who allegedly left their under-age maid locked in their Delhi home while vacationing in Thailand seems so incredibly insensitive. Yet, this is not a stray incident, we know.

The social divide between the haves and the have-nots goes back to the Stone Age, according to a study led by Welsh researchers. So, haven't we made any progress from the Stone Age? The socioeconomic class of a person affects their opportunities in every sphere — education, health and nutrition, employment and their world view. After a career workshop at a home for destitute girls, who had till then mostly wanted to be teachers and nurses, there were many who wanted to be flight attendants, pilots, artists and writers. We are no longer a role-based society; we cannot stay class-based. No one can stop a domestic help's child from being a software engineer.

Way back in 1847, in the classic *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray wrote of the social climber who "licks the boots of those above him and kicks the faces of those below him on the social ladder". The power a man feels over others is perhaps the biggest addiction and the prime corrupter. When the exploited retaliate, incidents like the one at the Maruti Suzuki's Manesar plant happen. When negotiations between the plant's management and the workers failed, the workers, singed by anger and insult, unleashed their wrath on executives including women. Managers were severely beaten and one of them was burnt to death.

In many areas of the city, auto drivers, cable TV operators and water suppliers run a mafia-like reign — one goes by their terms or not at all. We never treated this class of people well. We paid them for their services but gave kindness and civility a miss. We kept their cups and plates separate; we made them sit on the floor at our feet; ordered them

about, and never felt we owed them a sorry or thank you. So, what may have started as a tactic for self-preservation has taken the shape of brazen commercial manipulation. When small acts of unkindness are overlooked, they take the form of such devious exploitation for power and profits.

Humility, mother virtue

“Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter what fork you use.” (Emily Post, author and columnist) The good and the gracious do not go unnoticed. Such qualities in people always leave us feeling good, yet, why do we make so little effort to cultivate them? When the person ahead of us in the cinema holds the door open for us, we feel good. Then why don't we lower our voices when we enter a quiet lobby late at night? Why don't we tidy up ourselves and our homes to welcome visitors? Why don't we go to meet the child's teacher in smart clothes to show them respect? When we disagree with someone, why can't we wait for them to finish speaking before we calmly tell them our point of view? Why don't we clear our trays at a fast food joint and leave the baggage trolleys at their designated place?

Why are we hesitant in praising and quick in pointing mistakes?

It is often said that this is a bad time to be good. One young man who went through a harrowing time travelling to Gurgaon on a lonely stretch wished to alert others and blogged about it. Instead of appreciating it, almost everyone targeted him, asking him why he hadn't been braver, demanding that he file an FIR and share a photocopy for all to see, even making fun of his grammar. In a way social media too has contributed to the 'loosening' of acceptable behaviour. People do not thank others for wishing them, brazenly lift quotes, updates and pictures without due credit, make rude comments and get into unnecessary arguments. The medium is instantaneous. It does not allow second thoughts and because updates are soon buried over, there is little attempt to 'correct' oneself. This attitude spills over offline too.

“There is overwhelming evidence that the higher the level of self-esteem, the more likely one will be to treat others with respect, kindness, and generosity.” (Nathaniel Branden, psychotherapist and writer) In Hindustani too, there is a saying that it is a tree laden with fruit that bends down low. Humility is like the third eye that enables us to see others from a perspective clear of all prejudice and selfishness. It upholds graciousness as in the allegory of the long spoons where the beings in Hell suffered hunger and starvation because the spoons to eat with had long handles and their hands were in splinters that would not bend at the elbows to enable them to feed themselves, while those in Heaven in the same circumstances were happy and sated by feeding each other instead.

We're not born gracious. We imbibe it. Some years back, Singapore, in an effort to up its graciousness index, installed CCTV cameras on trains to monitor how many give seats to others. The public questioned the need for such 'enforced' civic behaviour. But the end

justifies the means. If people forget important life-sustaining lessons, they may be reminded, one way or the other.