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THE MANNERLESS INDIAN

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I

WHEN I read in Opinion's issue of October 6th the article by M. K. Rathish on "The Mannerless Indian" I was faintly amused because it brought back cherished memories.

It is quite true that many Indians, even some of those from whom one might have expected greater sophistication, have an endearing, if sometimes embarrassing, directness in the way they approach people. The first time I experienced how inquisitive and direct Indians can be was in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. I had embarked on an extensive survey of the causes and extent of the communal rioting in 1950. I was travelling on a river-boat when a little old gentleman with goatee and fez-shaped crocheted skull-cap asked me in Urdu where I was going. I answered in Hindustani that I was going to Narayan Ganj. He nodded and asked further, 'Is your husband there?' I said my husband was in Calcutta. 'Oh,' he said, 'Are you going to visit relatives in Narayan Ganj?' 'No,' I said, 'I do not know anybody in Narayan Ganj.'—'Ah, then why are you going to Narayan Ganj?'—'Because I want to see what Narayan Ganj is like.' He looked at me with obviously growing distaste and said, 'You are married, are you?' I said, 'Yes, I am married.'—'And your husband is in Calcutta?'—'Yes,' I said.—'Oh ho,' he said, and gave me a very dirty look and asked, 'How do I know that you are chaste?' He got up and moved across the aisle, sat down and to my utter confusion opened very demonstratively a copy of the air mail edition of the London 'Times'. What annoyed me was not his casting doubts on my respectability or my chastity but that this little prig had compelled me to discuss my affairs in Urdu when it might have been so much easier for me to discuss them in English. The questions he had asked were unthinkable in a Western society. However, unlike Mr. Rathish, I did not think then, nor do I think now, that the question 'Where are you going?' which he seemed to think extremely inquisitive is anything more than an innocuous opener to conversation between strangers. Asking me whether I was chaste, by contrast, was not inquisitiveness, it was bloody impertinence.

Whereas my fellow traveller in East Bengal was impertinent, indeed nasty, I have many times been asked very inquisitive questions during my travels in India. My fellow passengers were not impertinent, merely

inquisitive in a friendly fashion, like the gentleman with whom I was sharing a bench on a bus in Tamil Nadu, who enquired in a somewhat heavily accented English where I was going, whether I was married, how many children I had and what my husband was earning. The latter question annoyed me. Instead of answering, I asked him why he wanted to know how much my husband was earning, to which he answered disarmingly, 'If you tell me how much your husband earns I shall be able to know how important a man he is.' My answer to that was, 'Why didn't you ask me what his job is?' The man looked at me, nodded, and said, 'Ah, quite right, I did not think of it that way.' Questions about financial status used to be asked very frequently. This is not all that surprising in a society where government is still the biggest employer and where all government jobs are gazetted so that there is no secrecy about pay, and where even private business is often made to declare what directors get paid. This is not the case in the West where even within one company it is usual for people not to know what their fellow directors or experts are paid. In a big company they may know in what grade their colleagues are, this is probably not kept secret, but actual salaries and extra privileges are jealously guarded secrets; secrets which can be, and perhaps are, pried open by busybodies during gossip sessions.

Money, however, is not the only subject which exercises the friendly concern of the average Indian for his neighbour. Family and health are equally high on the priority list. I remember going to interview the late Patabi Sitaramaya when he was President of the Indian National Congress. At the end of the interview, he asked me, 'And how many children do you have?'—'One son,' I said. 'And how long have you been married?'—'Ten years,' I said. 'Ah,' he said, 'And how old is your boy?'—'Eight,' I said. He looked at me aghast, 'Why don't you have more? (Family planning had not yet become the order of the day.) He added, 'That is very bad. One. You must have more. Go back to your husband and promise you will have more.' The President of the Indian National Congress was representative of his fellow citizens. I was asked why I did not have more children so often that I ceased to feel embarrassed; it was almost as if somebody had asked me, 'Do you take sugar with your coffee?'

Health and appearance are two great favourite conversational gambits in India; gambits which sometimes require a robustly bouncing ego to cope with. I have not forgotten to this day the occasion when Morarji Desai, at the time Chief Minister of Bombay, greeted me at an official reception, while I was standing in the queue to be received, with a loud, 'Why, Mrs. Zinkin, you have got fat!' I know that 'fat' in India is almost synonymous with 'beautiful' but, having spent years, alas unsuccessfully, trying to control my girth, I did not relish that compliment. There was also another occasion during some official function when Morarji Bhai, noticing that I had a streaming cold, came over to enquire very loudly whether I was constipated. When I answered with

embarrassed astonishment, 'Why do you ask?' he said, 'Because colds are always caused by constipation.' Subjects such as constipation are freely discussed in India. It is not considered out of place for total strangers to inform one over a cup of tea that they are constipated as if this was a matter of general concern.

And there was the unforgettable moment, in 1945 in Lahore when we were introduced in the ghymkhana club, during a dance-evening, to the wife of a Senior Civil Servant. She took one look at Maurice and exclaimed loudly: "By God you are ugly!" Only too late did the appropriate response occur to me in defence of my husband. I should have retorted "Flattery will get you nowhere."

Nor is it considered rude for people to be frank. I still remember the remark made by an Oxford-returned graduate who came to dinner at our Bombay flat, looked round and informed me that she thought my curtains were horrid, that the colour scheme of my drawing-room did not meet with her approval and that she had not enjoyed the pudding. On reflection, after shedding a certain amount of annoyance, I realised that this was not a declaration of hostility; on the contrary. In a sense it was a compliment. She was treating me as a member of her own large joint-family and therefore telling me exactly what she thought without any malice whatsoever. Indeed, when one thinks back to some of the conversations one has had in India, one has always to bear in mind that so long as people are brought up in joint-families they are sufficiently cocooned from the outside world to be allowed—within the very strict rules of family hierarchy—to behave as children. This is no preparation for dealing with the outside Western world.

II

Indeed, it is this joint-family background which goes a long way to explain the lack of discretion and secretiveness with which Indians treat dentures. Over the years I have collected denture stories in the manner some people collect stamps. The first time I was struck by dentures was in 1950 while interviewing the Governor of West Bengal. In the course of that interview this venerable politician first put his spectacles down on the table, then, for a reason best known to himself, took out his dentures and laid them carefully on the desk beside his spectacles. His answers became very difficult to follow because of the spluttering sibilance toothlessness added to his speech. The same politician once visited Bihar. He had come by air to inaugurate a function, addressing the masses from a rostrum especially erected near the makeshift airstrip on which he had landed. He got off the plane, walked to the rostrum, stood before the microphone, started to splutter and turned to his ADC who raced back to the plane and took off. An hour later (an hour during which the audience, including myself in the Press enclosure sat listening to film music) the ADC returned, racing to the platform with a small parcel which he handed to the politician.

OPINION, November 10, 1981

It was the famous dentures which had been left behind and without which it was not possible for the speech to be made.

The outburst in which the late Rafi Ahmed Kidwai indulged to defend Nurul Amin when I ventured to say that the Chief Minister of Undivided Bengal had been exceedingly corrupt; taking as little as five rupees to appoint a peon, not to mention large amounts from those who could afford. Kidwai's defence of Nurul Admin was highly emotional. It was based on the fact that the Bengali politician might have been corrupt but that he never took money for himself and that he was exceedingly generous. 'To give you one example, I remember when Lord Mountbatten called a Conference of Chief Ministers. I was sitting next to Nurul Amin who could barely participate because he was toothless. When I asked what he had done with his teeth he explained that on his way to the airport he had been approached by a poor man in need of help because he had lost all his teeth. "By good luck my dentures happened to fit him." How can you say that a man who is prepared to give his teeth away to one in need is corrupt? I assure you, Mrs. Zinkin, Nurul Amin is a good man.'

I have more than once partaken of meals with a distinguished scholar who used, in the heat of discussion, to clinch his points by removing his front bridge to gesticulate with a couple of teeth the better to drive his arguments home. But the pearl of my collection, my prize story goes to a breakfast with the late Pratap Singh Kairon when he was Chief Minister of the Punjab. I had been summoned for breakfast by the Chief Minister. It was a superbly Burrah Sahib breakfast, served with exquisite pomp in the lovely dining room of the Chief Minister's House. The table was laid with damask and silver, a gallooned beturbaned butler was serving, standing behind me was an immaculately attired waiter. The breakfast was delicious, a compendium of the best that Britain and the tropics had to offer. At the end of that feast the butler brought a large crystal bowl filled with water and held it in front of the Chief Minister. I thought it was to wash his hands. We had just finished eating fruit. To my surprise Pratap Singh Kairon took out his dentures, rinsed them thoroughly in the gleaming bowl and clamped them back into place.

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