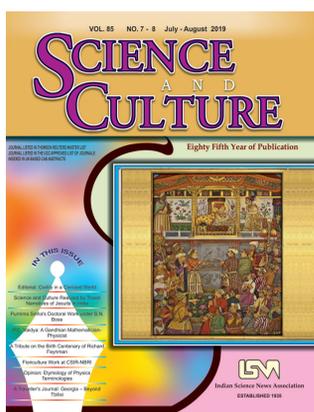


CIVILITY IN A CIVILIZED WORLD



Historically, civility was born to help us lead a disciplined, controlled and healthy life both morally and physically. Ideas about enforcing some rules and restrictions (manners) to keep us healthy in all forms originally sprouted from religious teachings everywhere. Traditionally, in India cleanliness was associated with worship and religious rituals rather than a habit, except possibly for the Brahmins. Churches in the west played a vital role in invoking manners for all and encouraged it with the maxim “Cleanliness is Godliness” stressing on both physical and spiritual cleanliness. That cleanliness was required to keep germs away was discovered as late as the nineteenth century. Gradually manners came out of religious identity and became a way of life for everyone.

What started as a means of being physically and mentally healthy, gradually changed to some manners adhering to different forms of social status and prestige with the introduction of different words in different social contexts such as *courtesy*, *etiquette*, *protocol* etc. *Courtesy* originated from the manners which are acceptable as a set of ‘do’s and don’ts’ to maintain a system of social position in the court. As found in scholastic history, a selection of maxims directed at young audience as courtesies related to table manners, conversation, personal appearance and social life was first found in the twelfth century Latin poem *Facetus* (means ‘polite man’). *Facetus* was taught in schools for more than 200 years till the beginning of

sixteenth century. However, with time manners got changed with the introduction of more and more regulations and restrictions.

Etiquette is conceived as subtle manners based on some broad principles of behaviour but more articulate in action. The word “etiquette” comes from the French word “estique,” meaning ‘to attach or stick’. Experts say that centuries ago, the word ‘etiquette’ principally signified a ticket or label tied to bags or bundles to denote their contents. A bag or bundle thus ticketed passed unchallenged without further questions, similar to boarding a plane in India with hand baggage with a stamped label, which had been in vogue till a couple of years ago. Another explanation connecting the word *etiquette* with a prescribed set of formalities is said to be originated from the use of tickets at the French court to show courtiers where they should sit at a table or at a ceremony. That the term is now being used to mean correct manners, like which knife is to be used in a formal dinner or how to shake hands, is an English invention. A word that signified something trivial in French became a very significant term in the English society.

The word *protocol* has its origin in the Greek word ‘proto’ meaning first and ‘kolla’ meaning glue. The Greek word ‘protokollan’ refers to the first sheet of paper (papyrus roll) showing the contents and preface of a document glued to the top of the document. This Greek word finally entered as an English word only in the nineteenth century from the French word ‘prothocolle’ used in sixteenth century. This word which was initially meant to be ‘official documents’ changed to ‘diplomatic documents’ to ‘formula for diplomatic etiquette’. However, *protocol* has a much wider meaning used in many other fields other than the world of diplomacy and bureaucracy. Some *etiquettes* and *protocols* that we still see today in India are the colonial hangover.

The need for food and the urge to have children were two main drivers in the early stages of human evolution. Eating was our first experience of sensual pleasure. As we started becoming 'civilized', we began to introduce various restrictions during meals such as not to touch food by hand for hygienic purpose. More restrictions were introduced with increasing urbanization and rising class of social status that pervaded the society (even in Indian society). The simple rule of not touching food by hand for health reasons was made more complex with added restrictions which we now know as 'table manners'. A civil society demands table manners while eating, especially in public. Unfortunately, all these restrictions not only inhibit our natural expression of enjoyment but also hamper the enjoyment of eating. I myself have been a victim of such misery on many occasions in formal dinners when I was completely focused on maintaining the decorum of table manners rather than enjoying the food. Natural expressiveness is one of the fundamental traits of human behaviour and isn't restricting these expressions an offence?

There is no universal etiquette that is followed across the world. Different countries have different sets of rules. Belching during or after eating is considered a major offence in almost everywhere in the world, including urban India, while belching after a meal in Korea is considered as complimentary to the chef. Same is true in rural India where belching expresses deep satisfaction after a meal. Use of belching for a positive purpose has been shown in a recent movie *Kontho* (voice). As in India, the French convention is not to praise the culinary skills of the host as it may appear as a veiled request for an extra serving. Hugging one as a symbol of love and friendship is welcome in one country but derogatory in another. One may recall the ruckus created when America's first lady Michelle Obama embraced the Queen during her visit to

the Queen as the protocol only permits a formal handshake with the Queen. In today's world good mannerism and etiquette seem important only in the corporate world as we find business schools spending money on teaching students how to pick up etiquettes to be used in business dealings.

Manners and etiquette that we have talked about are acquired traits of a human being, which can be attained easily. But where is the 'civility' that comes from the heart and needs to be cultivated within? We are living in an ailing society, diseased with dishonesty and mistrust, misbehavior and manipulation, aggression and violence. We are surviving in a society where civility is largely ignored. The following words of M. Scott Peck as described in his book 'Civility Rediscovered' define the present Indian society so well - "Morally destructive patterns of self-absorption, callousness, manipulateness, and materialism are so ingrained in our routine behavior that we often do not recognize them. In multiple ways we engage in subtle forms of unconscious hurtfulness toward ourselves and others."

Where have gone the patience and tolerance, compassion and humility which make us civil to each other, make us friends of each other? It is time to think about cultivating these traits in a 'civil' society. It is time to think about spiritual commitment that is the cornerstone of civility. In the past this trait of civility was instilled by parents but largely by the teachers. Voice of teachers has now been throttled by regulations and restrictions which has turned them into a mere mechanical verbal sound box. Restoration of freedom to teachers to inculcate discipline and ethics among the younger generation is the crying need of the day. □

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