Master of Blunders

By Aasha Mehreen Amin

MAKING *faux pas* is a common weakness in man. Every one of us at some point in time has put his foot in his mouth at, saying the inappropriate and causing quite a few cheeks to flush in embarrassment. We all make mistakes, its only human.

There is, however, a select group that seems to have turned this human flaw into an art from, mastering the technique of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. These genii have quite unwittingly soured friendships, shelved business deals, lost important accounts, estranged lovers — even started wars.

Take the friendly traveller who accosts every approachable face he encounters and tries to strike up a one-sided conversation at all costs starting off with priceless gems "Oh you have a lovely daughter" he will say to the gray haired distinguished gentleman who will shift uncomfortably and tersely say: "Well, ahem that's actually my...er. wife.

Often, therefore, a *faux pas* occurs when the FPE (*faux Pas Expert)* makes incorrect assumptions about a person based on his appearance. It is common practice for example, when we are abroad, to speak in our own motner tongue so that 'others' cannot understand all the nasty things you are saying about them. Once in a noisy cafe in London, a group of young Bangladeshi lads were having a typical Bengali *adda* session complete with *cha* and cigarettes. They were basically criticizing the racist attitudes of some of the English people they had encountered. At one point during their animated and rather loud conversation they noticed a large Caucasian man drinking beer and glaring at them ominously. This only added fuel to the fire and one of our *Bongoshontans* commented *'Oy ingrej motkake dekho na mod khey akbare tal. Jomer moto boshe amader dike takiye ache. Akhoni eshe akta ganjaam korbe'* (Look at that drunken fatso sitting like a zombie staring at us. Any moment he's going to come here and pick a fight). To their horror the big fellow actually did come over and the group was getting ready to adopt an equally belligerent stance when he said something that totally stumped them. *'Apnar bari koi?"* he said in perfect Bengali. After getting over the first shock the red-faced youths lost no time profusely apologizing to the man saying things like — "Its nothing personal you know"...At this point the burly fellow winked and said *"Apnara ingrejder somondhe ja bolechen thiki bolechen, Ami* Scottish" (What you said about the English is absolutely true. You see I'm a Scot). Apparently the Scotsman had been doing business in jute in Bangladesh for the last 17 years, thus his fluency.



As the saying goes too little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. This was the case of a young banker who had a knack for languages. He would pick up little phrases and sentences in various languages and then strategically throw them at parties — a great way to break the ice. On one occasion, however, he made quite a blunder. He had been invited to a reception for South Korea's National Day and he had memorized a few sentences to impress his hosts. Suddenly during the reception he lifted his glass and said something in Korean. The hosts and many of the Korean guests turned quite pale and the young Banker was almost asked to leave the party. Apparently what he had said was "Long live XYZ, the great North Korean leader"!

An FPE has no control over his blundering words. They are stealthy little creatures waiting for the opportune moment when they tumble out uncontrollably. At this point an FPE seems almost possessed for once he's started he makes one gaffe after another.

At a dinner party in Boston where many members of the Bangladeshi community had gathered, a young undergraduate student was talking about cookbooks on *deshi* food. He was referring to a curious dedication by one of the writers a renowned connoisseur of *deshi* cooking. The book he said, had been 'hypocritically' dedicated to the malnourished children of Bangladesh. "How ridiculous," he said, a to dedicate a book on the gastronomic delights of Mughlai food, to children who have never even seen, let alone taste, the likes of mutton *rezala* or *kofta curry*. "Its like a cruel joke!" After a long disconcerting pause the hostess coldly retorted: "The writer happens to be my *khala*" (aunt).

The feeling one gets after making a major FP is something like the time your chemistry teacher snatched your notebook to find unflattering caricatures of himself that you so laboriously drew while pretending to take copious notes of his enlightening lecture. One just wishes the earth underneath would open up and swallow one into it. Unfortunately such miracles seldom occur in the 20th century and all you can do is wear a foolish grin, apologize and bear the ordeal.

Such was the case when two businessmen and their families arrived at Nagahama train station in Japan and were received by two Japanese gentlemen whose English was rather limited. The businessman and his family thinking that it was the chauffeur and his handyman, unabashedly gave them their bags and suitcases which they carried while giving puzzled looks at each other. One of the suitcases was so heavy that the handle had broken and the Japanese gentleman carrying it had to practically lift it up all the way. Upon reaching the car one of the businessmen took out his wallet to give them a generous tip for their help when they handed them two visiting cards. One said President of XYZ Corporation and the other said Vice President. ■