such a great opportunity might be lost before it began.

Fortunately we didn't have to stay. As we left she was busily telling a young Bangladeshi girl, maybe six years old, 'In English we say please and thank you!' She wanted to force the girl to say 'please' before handing her a candy. There was some irony in her instructing on manners and it made me wonder if I had ever been so culturally judgemental.

The young girl didn't know what to do. I wanted to say, 'Look, it's there, her 'please' is in her expression. It's in her shyness which means respect.' I wanted to say, 'Leave her alone!' or 'How about you learn some Bangla?' But there was no point.

Reality: if an English-speaker sits at a Norwegian dinner table they're likely to be shocked. 'Pass the salt!' they'll say, a little too directly. On the Norwegian street, passers by stare, while in Sydney it's usual if you catch a stranger's eye to look away or smile. The difference was significant enough that when I first went to Oslo at age eighteen the street staring used to have me scanning my clothes to see if there was something odd. T-shirt is back to front?

Yet within days I'd learnt that Norwegian phrase *takk for maten*, 'thanks for the food,' to be said after every meal. I learnt *takk for sist*, which means 'thanks for the last time we met,' and can be said on re-meeting someone. In Australia these are not similar customs.

Reality: if an English-speaker goes to Iran it's the locals who might be shocked. You can't just say *salaam* to greet someone; it needs to be a slightly sung, full-hearted *salaaaam!* to matter. There might need to be a kiss on each cheek. Farsi has several phrases for 'how are you?' It might be insufficient to use only one; and there are three versions of 'thank you', often strung together and with a 'very much' thrown in.

There were other unique systems: Iranians will seat the most important guest furthest from the door and all things should be offered three times and twice refused before being accepted on the third offer, which is the genuine one. More informally I remember scenes of Iranians passing handfuls of sunflower seeds down the intercity bus, row by row, passenger by passenger, until it reached the foreign guests! When it comes to the verbal 'thank you' alone, Iranians leave English-speakers for dust.

Reality: Bangladeshis are mostly polite, especially in the village; and it might sound strange but I used to wonder how they managed it since there is a deficit of 'please' and 'thank you' to an English-speaker's ears. It's because in terms of sophistication, Bengalis leave English-speakers for dust.

Think about all the gestures the foreigner must learn. There's the 'sorry' pat on the shoulder if you accidentally bump someone in a crowd. There's the 'even sorrier' arm stroking, often favoured with friends or creditors. There's the perhaps old-fashioned 'very sorry,' displayed by sticking the tongue out, tugging on ear lobes and doing squats; and I once saw the 'extremely sorry' of hitting one's cheeks with one's own shoes!

There's the sharing a cup of tea to end a dispute and the process of village mediations that must go back for thousands of years. We can show respect by offering or taking things with both hands. Splitting bills, as is common in the west, is out of the question and within many a Bangladeshi family the concept of sharing property like clothes or jewellery is taken for granted.

Think about the degrees of 'you' that no longer exist in English. In place of every *aapni*, imagine if you put a 'please': how much more prolific they would be than in an ordinary English sentence, because *aapni* is there in every verb. *Tumi* and *tui* may also have politeness when they indicate closeness or caring.

Think about the greetings. It took me time to properly understand how all the villagers saying *assalamu alaikum* or *namaskar* were not simply saying 'hello' or 'good morning.' *Walaikum salam*, I could happily respond, without having a clue as to the respect present within the exchange.

Years ago, it was common after a handshake to put your hand to the heart; and there's the hand-to-mouth-then-heart gesture if your foot accidentally touches someone, the gesture that makes the villagers laugh when I do it because I've added a little signature flick to the end of mine. Beyond that, there are indescribable smaller gestures, a look in the eyes or a smile of delight: nobody seems to do these things the way Bengalis do. And let's not even get started on the *jamai*, the son-in-law! These ways of expressing politeness, caring and consideration are harder to fake than the verbal version.

Unfortunately, telling that girl to say 'please' is not a neutral act. It is a cultural imposition that sets the English-speaker's way as the standard to live up to and be judged by. Let's not do that anymore. This is the twenty-first century and we tried that last century.

The girl can be polite in the very many local ways available and if she wants to attend English class or go to Australia later, let her learn the petty forms of politeness then: it's easy to adjust to the Toyota model if you've been taught to drive the Mercedes.

It's understandable the Australian woman didn't know these things. What's sad and embarrassing for another Australian is that she couldn't imagine she didn't know. Then again, she didn't know the Cold War ended either.

In these heady days of a nationwide reaffirmation of what it means to be Bangladeshi, there's this minor matter I'd like to throw into the pan: Bangladeshi manners. I'm busy trying to reduce my use of *dhonnobhad*, the verbal thank you. I want to drive the Mercedes! ■