

Etiquette: Why we need it

ALIZA RAHMAN

What is the point of etiquette? Maybe to ensure we don't repulse or offend others.

From repeatedly putting their elbows on the desks of another person to snatching the test paper of someone else, rude behaviour comes in many forms and aggravates in many ways.

You'll often hear people complain that a particular someone is uncultured for behaving a particular way all the while seeming uncultured and rude themselves to other people in their vicinity who think it's unacceptable to badmouth someone in their absence, and that too audibly. Ill-mannered people say other possibly ill-mannered people need etiquette classes. But what is etiquette? Especially in a young country that is rapidly developing, was formerly colonised, and is now exposed to (and seems to adore) Western culture?

We know that they don't come naturally to us. Etiquette is taught and learned. But who decides what etiquette is? And why do only some know it?

It is common knowledge that many of the social norms and rules we have today were passed down from those in higher positions in society. One account goes that it began with Louis XIV's gardener who put up signs asking people to not walk on the grass. The signs were also known as etiquets. Real life isn't that straightforward; we don't have signs with instructions. It is tricky to know how one should behave during social interactions. A certain gesture to one can be a sign of affection and the same gesture to another can be a violation of space and privacy. Exacerbating the problem is that we seem to lack guidelines telling us what etiquette in Bangladesh should be.

However, the absence of a specific guide on what constitutes acceptable behaviour may not be as awful as we think. The situation isn't hopeless. In fact, remembering a few things might make being around people smoother and less rage-inducing.

BACKGROUNDS

It is unfortunate that the word background has come to have a negative connotation, because it might be the most helpful thing to remember when we find someone's behaviour intolerable. Think of a situation where a person faces a problem at work but won't ask for help. In a situation like this, it is easy to be irritated because we might assume the person is egoistic. But there could be a range of other possibilities ranging from the person being shy to the person coming from a school that put excessive pressure on being perfect. It is often surprising to learn how different the situations people grew up in are, and learning about the background of someone we were annoyed by can often cause us to feel ashamed. An open mind might be key.

THE AGE FACTOR

Clashes between people of different generations are as old as time. Be it dinner parties or casual conversations, we often get shocked, annoyed and upset by the words and actions of people in different age groups. But before getting irritated at the auntie who puts food on your plate after you requested her not to and before getting upset at the uncle who unknowingly makes disparaging remarks about your future plans, it might make it easier to remember that they belong to a different time and place, and hence they live by different rules and expectations. Changing and adapting to newer social norms isn't always easy, and in a culture where younger people are taught to be unquestioningly obedient to older people, the older people may have never been told how their words and actions affect others.

SEEING PEOPLE THE WAY YOU WOULD SEE CHILDREN

We see children as faultless, but not adults. As we grow older, we often end up becoming more suspicious of peo-



ple and ascribe negative attributes to people who might in reality be benign. Some actions are of course serious and ought to be protested strongly, but often times the seriousness of the breaches aren't that high. A person might not be mature and an innocent action can end up having a lot of meanings, sometimes negative, attached to it. Giving people the benefit of the doubt is beneficial, for both you and the person, especially if they ended up doing something you would consider rude without intending to and are actually open to learning.

BEING POLITE IS AN ACT OF KINDNESS

When you put in the effort to behave in a way that makes people feel comfortable and appreciated, people will be grateful. The world we live in today requires us to communicate with various people every day, and being

attuned to their needs isn't a huge sacrifice on anyone's part. It requires a bit of self-control and a bit of self-awareness, and ultimately, you make someone else's life a little easier.

Adherence to a specific set of rules may not be needed, especially in a world where information regarding what manners are hasn't reached every group of people in our society. As Nick Carraway says in the first chapter of The Great Gatsby, "a sense of the fundamental decencies is parceled out unequally at birth." Kindness, empathy, patience, and just developing the habit of being observant, logical, and understanding on a daily basis may suffice.

Aliza is Matilda resurrected. Reach her at aliza.hridula@gmail.com