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Dil se: In a manner of speaking...

"Mad, bad, and dangerous to know," was Lady Caroline Lamb's assessment of her lover Lord Byron. If a Reader's Digest survey is to be believed, Mumbaikars -- or Bombayites -- are a rude, crude, ill-mannered brood. They don't hold the door open for someone right behind them, they don't help a passer-by pick-up a dropped newspaper or a pile of documents, and shopkeepers don't thank customers after a retail experience.

Anyone who has spent a reasonable length of time in India's famed entrepot will be slack-jawed by the assertion. To rub salt into the wound, the survey rates New York -- about which it is said it has always been going to hell but somehow has never gotten there -- as the world's most polite city. The gagmeister David Letterman once spoke of a new billboard outside Times Square that kept an up-to-minute count of gun-related crimes in New York. "Some goofball," he deadpanned, "is going to shoot someone just to see the numbers move." Polite, huh?

One does not want to condone poor etiquette, but different societies use different metrics to assess manners. Many Indians are rude in western eyes because they do not vocalize or articulate their gratitude or helpfulness. But they express it in different forms. In fact, there is a theory -- not entirely credible -- about why in some societies, men do not hold the door open for women to step out first. That would be considered thoughtless because they are supposed to lead and see there is no danger.

Dr Venugopal Reddiar, an Iowa physician who has studied body language, recently reflected on cultural differences when it comes to gestures. Crossing ones arms may signal deference in India, but in some societies it indicates defiance. Eye contact is a sign of respect and confidence in America, but elsewhere it suggests confrontation. Just saying "pass the salt" without adding "please" followed by "thank you" is unacceptable in the west, but most Indians express appreciation with a change of tone while asking.

In many Indian homes, even in the U.S, it is considered good manners -- and good hygiene -- to remove ones footwear before entering the house, something westerners may not be attuned to doing. A burp may be an expression of satisfaction for some but a disgusting emission for others. Some apologize for it and others don't. Indians abroad often display poor manners by western outlook, but they have other sterling qualities. There are realtors who don't like renting to Indians because they cook spicy food and make homes smelly. There are realtors who like renting to Indians because they are quiet and law-abiding.

Form and etiquette becomes more important as you go higher up the social ladder and it improves as you travel more. Many U.S papers run a popular column on etiquette by Judith Martin aka "Miss Manners" in which readers ask delicate etiquette-related questions. Among her output of 14 books are two titled "Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior" and "Miss Manners on Painfully Proper Weddings." As the titles imply, they are little over the top.

As for Mumbaikars being thankless or heartless, you only have to hark back to their response to the monsoon mayhem of last year and compare it to the Katrina catastrophe to realize that the Readers' Digest poll is all bunk. When you are trying to eke out a living in a predatory city of 20 million people, etiquette, as framed by Reader's Digest, is the last thing on anyone's mind. Mumbai maybe missing manners, but it sure has heart, which is far more important.