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COMMENTARY

Bombay Rude? Hard to Digest!

 By **SUKETU MEHTA**
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NEW YORK -- In a recent survey of global courtesy, Readers Digest found Bombay -- now officially called Mumbai -- to be the rudest city on earth. As a person brought up in Bombay, I might have been offended, if the same survey hadn't proclaimed the politest city in the world to be... New York. In the immortal words of Rudy Giuliani, when he was informed of the verdict of etiquette experts in 2001 that his was the nation's politest city, "What were they smoking?"

I checked to see if the survey was another one of the stately Digest's joke sections. But no, it's meant to be taken seriously and confirm the Digest's core mission: in 60 countries, in 21 languages, to reassure Americans about their superiority to the rest of the planet.

What was the Digest's evidence for dissing Bombay? People in the Indian megapolis flunk the survey's three tests of politeness: They don't say "Thank you," don't open doors for others, and don't help strangers pick up dropped papers.

Has anyone told the folks in Pleasantville that most people in India don't say "Thank you" after a transaction? They nod or wag their heads in acknowledgment. Nobody considers it discourteous. And in Bombay, professional doormen are paid to hold open doors in the kind of public buildings the survey was carried out; customers neither open doors for others nor expect others to hold them open for them. As for dropped paper, there's so much litter and so few garbage cans in Bombay that if a person drops a piece of paper in front of you, you would be justified in assuming it's because they want to get rid of it.

In quest of its exquisitely well-mannered New Yorkers, the magazine conducted its research entirely in what it quaintly considers a quintessential New York institution: Starbucks coffee shops. Not bodegas, or delis, or fried chicken outlets, where the results might arguably have been very different. It's not that people who like to pay three bucks for a cup of coffee at Starbucks are more polite -- only differently polite. In the less chi-chi parts of the city I call home now, they might not hold the door open for you, but they're more likely to help you out in finding a job or an apartment. The Digest concluded that the rich are more courteous than the scruffy. "It was prosperous cities that were at the top of our rankings." It is no wonder that, out of the 35 cities surveyed, eight out of nine Asian cities finished in the bottom 11.

I suggest that the Digest conduct a *second* survey, using my own measures of civic courtesy: If four people are seated on a commuter train bench designed for three, will they accommodate a fifth person? Will people smile brightly at a stranger's little kid in a restaurant, stopping by to say "How sweet!" -- even when the child is being noisy? And if people are eating in a train compartment, will they share their food with you? I bet Bombay would come out tops.

Though most Bombayites would consider the Digest's findings about as painful as a mosquito bite, an article accompanying might cause them to choke on their chapatis. In it, a Bombayite is quoted as saying, "In Mumbai,

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they'll step over a person who has fallen in the street." I'd like to think that the dear old Digest, which I grew up reading in India, doesn't really believe this grotesque view of the city, for in 1997 they published an excerpt from an article I'd written about the everyday courtesies of the Bombay trains:

"If you are late for work in Mumbai and reach the station just as the train is leaving the platform, don't despair. You can run up to the packed compartments and find many hands unfolding like petals to pull you on board. And while you will probably have to hang on to the door frame with your fingertips, you are still grateful for the empathy of your fellow passengers, already packed tighter than cattle, their shirts drenched with sweat in the badly ventilated compartment. They know that your boss might yell at you or cut your pay if you miss this train. And at the moment of contact, they do not know if the hand reaching for theirs belongs to a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian or a Brahmin or an Untouchable. Come on board, they say. We'll adjust."

Now that's called opening doors for others.

Mr. Mehta is the author of "Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found" (Vintage, 2005).

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