

# Metropolitan

## M A N N E R S

### Bombay

HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL  
BOMBAY WALLAH  
IN 6 EASY STEPS

◆ Vasant (and the name is disguised) is a friend of a friend. He is perhaps archetypal of Bombay's Malabar Hill intelligentsia. Works in advertising, collects Tanjore glass paintings, is keenly "into celluloid" and discusses metaphysics at the drop of a *koan*. He has a psyche traumatised by a recent divorce and a bladder apparently traumatised by an early session of Est. (Remember Est?) He works demonstratively long hours and responds to the question "How are you?" with a careless "Overworked and underpaid, *yaar*". (If on occasion he switches it round to "Overpaid and underworked, *yaar*", please note that he is actually saying the same thing — only differently.) He takes his cues from New York and London on matters of leisure activity, exercise, diet, societal concern etc., but skilfully blends his general outlook with a fashionable and assertive Indian-ness where necessary.

As I said earlier, Vasant is something of an archetype. And it is to him that this article is respectfully dedicated. (After all, most of its contents have been gleaned through my association with him, one way or the other.)

#### ◆ THOU SHALT SURVIVE

There was an old Hindi film song of the early '50s which said it all. It went:

When in Delhi, don't do  
as the Bombaywallahs do.  
And if you're in Madras,  
do remember that Mount Road  
is not Chowringhee Street.  
Each of India's four metropolitan  
cities has its individual style.  
So conform to form... change  
your beat to suit the city's  
social rhythm and master the  
moves in the play of manners.

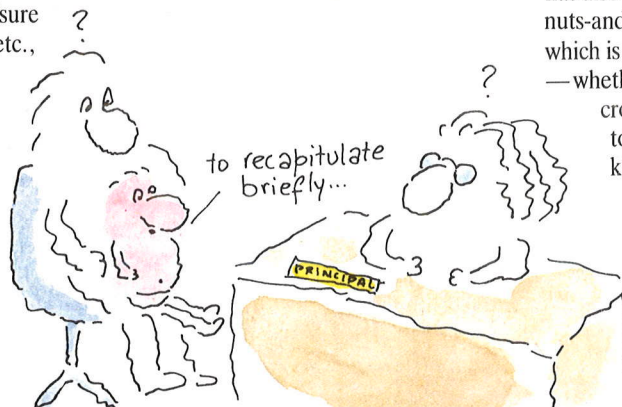
*"Ae dil, hai mushkil,  
Jeena yahan,  
Zara hatke, zara bachke,  
Yeh hai Bombay, meri jaan..."*

Or (these things translate badly):

"Oh, my heart,  
It's difficult living here,  
So be careful, be careful,  
This is Bombay, my dear..."

If that statement was considered relevant back in the innocent days of the '50s, its relevance is redoubled in the hustling, street-smart Bombay of today. The first rule of etiquette here, therefore, is survival. Everything else comes later. Much later.

That's why the Bombaywallah has, over the years, developed his characteristic quiet, matter-of-fact efficiency (which makes Bombay probably the only city in India where things really *work*). And, more significantly, that's why the Bombaywallah has also developed that pragmatic, nuts-and-bolts spirit of competitiveness which is constantly working overtime — whether it's in the matter of boarding a crowded suburban train, trying to get a new gas cylinder for the kitchen, fighting a battle of attrition with the landlord/tenant, or, as is Vasant's preoccupation, scaling the corporate ladder. (He has gone from a Rs 300-a-month-trainee to some form of exalted vice-president, I understand, in the space of a dozen years. And now he's in the



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process of passing the relevant skills down to his son: aged one-and-a-half, the child has just successfully passed an interview — an *interview* — to get into playschool.)

That's Bombay.

◆ THOU ART ALLOWED TO LOOK DOWN SLIGHTLY ON THE NON-BOMBAYWALLAH

Having developed his own highly sophisticated survival skills, professional and social, the Bombaywallah tends to view citizens from other parts of the country as being somewhat less advanced on the evolutionary scale. This is not any form of arrogance, mind you, but an attitude that is perfectly rational and, given the facts, quite just, proper and fitting. (After all, Alvin Toffler himself has identified Bombay and its hinterland as the only island of Industrial Society in this entire part of the world, the rest of which is mainly still stuck in the agrarian age.)

But if the Bombaywallah looks down slightly on non-Bombaywallahs in general, he looks down on the Dilliwalla in particular. The reason being, of course, that the Dilliwalla presumes that there is some sort of rivalry between the two cities. Now this is both unfortunate and unreasonable. After all, not everybody is even agreed upon whether Delhi is a city or not. ("Glorified village" is about as far as many people would go.) And as for the Dilliwalla himself, he is basically a barbarian from the North with, as Vasant so picturesquely once put it, "an unfortunate extra dash of Chromosome Y" — which presumably accounts for the loud, aggressive and generally uncouth behaviour.

The Bombaywallah will tackle any situation arising out of this supposed rivalry in his own mature and self-assured manner. No pointless slanging-matches, no arguments. Instead, he will listen to everything with a quiet smile, and then at *precisely* the right tactical moment, let drop a devastating first-hand horror story about Delhi telephone operators. Or, better still, taxi drivers. The matter then usually ends right there.

◆ THOU SHALT KNOW THY CITY'S GEOGRAPHY... AND LIVE BY IT

There are, in fact, two separate Bombays that exist side by side within the city's geography. One is located specifically in Cuffe Parade, Malabar Hill, Breach Candy and Peddar Road. Today — times being what they are — it has also extended to cover Bandra and Juhu (but *not* Versova). The other Bombay accounts for everything else, from Ghatkopar to Pydhonie. And as whoever-it-

was once said, "ne'er the twain shall meet".

If you live in the former of the two Bombays, here are a few of the people, places and things that are likely to fall within the ambit of your lifestyle:

- The Sunday Observer
- Antiques from Chor Bazaar
- Holidays in Goa
- Begum Akhtar's *ghazals* (or Mehdi Hasan's — but always take a stand, one way or the other)
- 5-star hotel credit cards
- The Jazz Yatra
- Nike shoes
- Paco Rabanne/Obsession
- Alyque Padamsee
- The Bombay Gym (more for its bar than its squash courts)
- Indian Institute of Management batchmates
- Nalanda and Strand (for books)
- VCRs (Watch yours avidly, but publicly regret the fact that it "somehow devalues cinema". Occasionally you can even say: "What I'd do to watch a film in a proper cinema house again." It sounds good.)

◆ THOU SHALT BE BINDAAS... OR AT LEAST VERY BROAD-MINDED

*Bindaas* is a typically Bombay word. Literally, it means 'without fear', but in usage it probably falls somewhere in-between

'slightly wild' and 'totally unconcerned'. Now reading Bombay's gossip magazines (viz. Stardust, Savvy, Society), one might be led to believe that Bombay is a particularly *bindaas* city: from their pages it would appear that half the city's population is not married but living together, while the other half is married but not living together.

Now this is not true. But what is certainly true is that the Bombaywallah is an uncommonly cosmopolitan, broad-minded and sensible person. And his attitude could be summed up in one sentence: "*Arre baba, apan ka kya jaata hai?*" (Roughly translated: "So how does it bother me?")

That's the beauty of Bombay: 8 million people going about their 8 million individual businesses.

Sometimes, however, this spirit of unconcern takes slightly different aspects. I met a couple at a party some weeks ago for instance, and over the course of the evening we became good friends.

"Where do you live?" they asked me.

"Colaba," I replied.

"Oh, we live in Colaba, too. Which part of Colaba are you in?"

"Near the Telephone Exchange."

"Oh, we live near the Telephone Exchange, too. Which building are you in?"

"Sunita."

"Oh, we live in Sunita, too. Which floor are you on?"

It turned out we had lived in the same building for nearly 10 years; we were separated by two floors; we had never met.

That's Bombay, too.

◆ THOU SHALT INDULGE IN SOCIAL GAMESMANSHIP... BUT FIRST THOU SHALT LEARN ITS RULES

This is the subject for an entire article by itself (if not an entire book). But I shall attempt here to lay down a couple of quick pointers.

For instance, in Bombay, when you meet someone socially, the transaction often ends with one party turning to the other and saying, "Oh, you must drop in sometime". Now you must not mistake this for some kind of invitation — because it's not. What it is, in fact, is a highly sophisticated social device for establishing the hierarchical relationship between the two parties concerned. Thus it is always said by the hierarchically *superior* party to the one who is hierarchically somewhat lesser. Let us be very clear about this. (It would be



# Delhi

GET IN TOUCH GIVE US A CALL



While eating out in Bombay, if you really want to impress, you should know your way around the city's humbler eating houses. This is the mark of the true maestro.

a gaffe of the highest magnitude if you were to turn round to, say, Nusli Wadia and say, "Do drop in sometime." — unless, of course, you yourself happened to be JRD Tata.)

As to what the correct response to this is — well, it depends. Usually you say politely, "You must drop in, too." But in cases where the hierarchical gap exceeds a factor of 2.5 (and there's a complex mathematical formula available to determine this), the correct response is merely, "Thank you. I will." Further, remember that, as indicated earlier, this is not really an invitation but merely a social device *and must therefore not be taken literally*. (It could be embarrassing.)

Similar to this (but very different) is the ritual of "We must meet up for lunch sometime". This phrase is basically an expression of professional or social acceptance of one party by the other. And, as you must understand, it is complete in itself — so it need never actually be followed up on. The thought that you're being insincere does not arise because a) you have, by use of the ritual, clearly established the esteem in which you hold the other party, and b) he realises that you, like every other Bombaywallah, are a busy person and don't have time to spare. (And, even if you do, he doesn't. So that's that.)

## ◆ THOU SHALT KNOW THE ART OF REVERSE SNOBBERY

It's all very well entertaining people at the Golden Dragon or China Garden, for instance. But if you *really* want to impress, you should

know your way around the city's Irani restaurants and other humbler little eating joints. It is this that is the mark of the true maestro.

Try Gulshan-e-Iran, behind Crawford Market. (Very good *paya*, not overly spiced, like at some other places.) Or Hyderabad-Sind at Dhobitalao. (Excellent *baingan fry*.) Or Thakker's Club at Kalbadevi. (Superb *doodh-pak* and *puri* on full-moon nights.) Or Kyani's, opposite the Metro cinema. (Delicious *pudina* tea and cream buns.)

An important part of the whole game, by the way, is that you should know at least one key member of the staff *by name*. (At the Grant Road Delhi Darbar, for instance, my friend, Vasant, never fails to enquire about the welfare of Allahrakha-bhai. Whether such a person ever actually existed is not entirely clear.)

All this is just one example of how to make reverse snobbery work for you. There are others. Like wearing a *dhoti* to a gathering where everybody else has been dressed by Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein. Or spending your holidays in Arunachal Pradesh instead of Europe. Or like refusing to buy a car and travelling everywhere by taxi instead. ("Works out more expensive, I guess — but there's no way I'd drive in this Bombay traffic, *yaar*.")

The possibilities are limitless. Just use your imagination. And, good luck.

— ANVAR ALIKHAN

■ Taste and class have sharply defined Delhi's social circles. The circles have been, and always will be, clearly etched out with few overlaps. One circle belongs to the landed gentry, the old money, the culture or Doon School connection, the St. Stephen's camaraderie, the Gymkhana chummy. For such people being born into the right families at the right time in the right South Delhi Colony mattered. They went to the right schools and colleges, appreciated the right kind of flower shows, joined the right clubs, got the right jobs, will die right and eventually reincarnate into the right beings. For them, Delhi does not extend too far South, but remains within the lush domain of Lutyens, in the Golf Links and the Sundar Nagars. Life is for forms sake. Appreciation and taste were the two things that mattered. You were meant to like Pandit Jasraj but not Lata Mangeshkar; you were more inclined to play golf than listen to the cricket commentary; your intuitive knowledge of handwoven fabrics had to overcome your longing for synthetics. But these are small things, and with money having been already successfully earned and invested by forgotten generations, there is all the time in the world to enrich your tastes.

The second circle, and one increasing rapidly in circumference, belongs to the new money. Where inheritance has been negligible and where trappings of birth and upbringing do not play a major role in ordinary discussions, a newer method of survival had to be appropriated: Money, and with it the freedom to buy all that was once lacking — culture,

