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The guest as god, no less



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Total strangers often go to make good friends in the great Indian tradition of hospitality

Indians have a unique tradition of “hospitality” inborn in them and extend it to guests when they call on us. We greet them with a “please come in” or a *namaskar*, as a part of our culture. This comes to us spontaneously. When we call at a friend’s house we are immediately requested to sit down and are offered a glass of water to quench our thirst. And within minutes a cup of hot tea is offered, too. This is the Indian tradition and this continues even today.

Thoughtful help

In December 1945 my elder brother and I, then 12 years of age, accompanied our father to a small hill station called Palampur in what is today Himachal Pradesh. In the afternoon we decided to walk along the road from our lodge enjoying the weather: it was shivering cold for

us. The scenery was enjoyable.

And suddenly we were pelted by hail and we ran in search of some cover to protect our head and body. We took shelter under a tree with thick foliage and this did give some degree of protection. Within minutes, a group of teenage boys came to us with thick cloth sheets which they held above our heads and escorted us carefully to a building nearby. Before we could say a word they brought us hot cups of tea and ensured that we drank it down before we sat down comfortably on chairs they provided.

We were told the building we were in was a hostel for a school next door. They had seen us walking leisurely and when the rain came down in a heavy downpour with hailstones, they knew we would be in need of help – and we were! We left soon afterwards. Our father thanked the boys and blessed them.

In 1952, I was a hostel student in Chennai, then Madras. For my summer holidays I went to Kandla. The train journey was interesting: Madras Central to Bombay VT. and then to Bombay central to Virangam to Navlakhi. Thereafter by ferry to Kandla port. Since I was travelling with a free rail pass I relied on railway canteen food and this was noticed by the Gujarati family travelling with me. I was persuaded to join them for dinner which I did. It was one of the most unforgettable vegetarian meals that I ever had.

For the first time I tasted real *dhokla*, the taste of which is still fresh in my memory even now, after 65 years.

Debt repaid

Later in 2005 I happened to see a Hindi film titled *Swades* in which Shah Rukh Khan acted as a NASA employee. In the story he was brought up by a lady and he returns to meet her and entreat her to go with him to the United States. She meanwhile asks him to go to a village where a villager who owed her a large sum of money lived.

SRK with an escort reached the village and he was shocked at the poverty in which the villager lived. In spite of his inability to pay back the money owed, he, his wife and two children gave up their lunch to feed SRK and his escort. This part of the film was so touching it brought tears to my eyes. I was about 70 years old then and shed tears. This was the real show of Indian hospitality, *athithi devo bhava* – the guest is god! The scene was so touching and real it still strikes me to be a true Indian.

Long live Indian hospitality.

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