

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CLEANLINESS: EATING AND SO FORTH

By Dan M. Matson (Modified)

One often hears that "India is a dirty country." If this means that there's a lot of dirt and dust there, then it's true; there is here, too. But if it's supposed to mean that Indians are dirty people, then there's got to be something wrong with the speaker's reasoning; in a tropical climate where millions of people live close together, it seems natural to expect that there would be certain rules of conduct regarding cleanliness. There are such rules in India --plenty of them; but it turns out that cleanliness is just one more concept that doesn't happen to have the same meaning in every society, after all.

Take a simple example: most Americans would rather sleep in the same room with the family dog than with the family cow; with Indians it's just the opposite. Now consider what's at work here. It isn't that American cows are 'dirtier' than dogs; on today's modern American farms the cows are probably 'cleaner' than the dogs. It's that sleeping with cows in the room is something we don't do, but that Indians do do. And that neither our habits nor theirs are more 'logical,' or 'natural,' or 'sensible'. It's just that our habits and their habits aren't the same, and that each set of habits is suitable to (and required in) only that society where they are the norm.

This fact has far-reaching consequences in the institution of cleanliness. An important example is the use of soap. That's not quite so, of course; getting clean is faster with soap, but it's physically possible without it. Anything is soluble in water to a certain (though possibly 'negligible') extent, and look what running water did in the Grand Canyon. But again, the physical considerations aren't of primary importance. What if you spill indelible ink on your fingers? You wash off what you can, and wait for the rest to wear off. Until it does, though, it's obvious that your fingers aren't physically clean. But they're clean enough, and that's the point; in terms of cultural behavior, 'clean' means 'clean enough,' and every culture and subculture is free to enforce its culture-bound concept. And part of living successfully in a foreign culture is getting to understand, appreciate, and operate within the framework of its cleanliness rules.

When I was in college, I once had two Indian roommates. This was before I got into the South Asia business, and I was puzzled when they spoke of the difficulties many Westerners have eating in India. "Oh, don't you use forks and things, like we do?" "No, we don't." (They were smiling.) "Well what do you use then?" "Our fingers." I didn't say so, but the idea was quite disgusting, and I was really upset at the thought of eating all my food with my hands; bread and carrot sticks and things, that I could see, but meat and potatoes? Gack! What a filthy way to eat! Ah, the naivete of youth.

Two years later I found myself living in an Indian house with a very leaky thatched roof, no lights or water, and three Indians who didn't share my reservations about how dirty it is to eat with your bare hands. Since I wasn't able to follow my preference and go back home, I decided to save the venture from being a total loss by at least learning the etiquette of eating with your hands. (In fairness to myself I'd like to point out that this shows I wasn't so totally naive as to think there weren't any 'manners' involved in eating with your hands. This is in contrast to the answer most Indians are likely to give you if you ask them to tell you about Indian table manners. "There aren't any," they'll probably say, "just pick up your food and eat." Any Indians who say this--besides being totally incorrect--betray how culture-bound they themselves are; they think 'table manners' means simply 'what Westerners do with their knives and forks, and they tend to scoff at the whole idea as being materialistic and a nuisance. This points to the fact that it's usually unprofitable to ask Indians about the behavior rules of their culture-- unless you already know most of the answer. The best way to learn most of the answer is from watching how they behave. And that's how I learned to eat with my hands in Indian style.

Well, I discovered that South Asian food actually tastes better if you 'know the rules' than if you just manage to shovel it in any old way. If you don't do it right, the rice or chapati won't have any taste, and the cook's efforts will be wasted. And if you can handle the food, your other problems will seem a little less heavy. I can't tell you all the rules on eating in South Asia--partly because I don't know them all (as I keep discovering), and partly because they vary slightly in different areas, and even among different groups of people in a single area. But there's one cardinal rule that (as far as I know) is invariant over all of South Asia: you eat with your **right** hand, and serve yourself (if you must) with your **left** hand, especially after you have saliva on your right hand. Perform either of these two tasks with the wrong hand, and you have committed an insufferable social blunder. If you're left-handed, forget it; you can't be left-handed in South Asia (at least for eating), and left-handedness is trained out of children who are born with it (but it's all right to eat left-handed with a fork or spoon--the very fact of using cutlery puts you outside the system). Note: In some Muslim homes, the whole family eats from the same serving dish. In such cases, saliva or not, you serve yourself with your right hand.

Let's begin at the beginning. In most South Asian homes you sit on the floor to eat, and your food is on the floor in front of you. In a "hotel" (the standard word in India or Nepal for 'restaurant') you will sit on a chair, a stool, or bench, and your food will be placed on a table, or else on the same bench if the hotel is too small to accommodate a table (there are also many snack-shops of the walk-up variety, where you eat standing outside, holding your food in your left hand and eating it with your right; there are also many hotels where lower-class people will go inside and eat, and where higher classes will stand outside to eat--but this is getting somewhat complex). There are three positions you can assume for sitting on the floor to eat; any one of them is all right, for either sex, but you'll probably want to work through at least two of them, so you can switch when you get tired of holding yourself in one.

The first is to sit cross-legged, with each ankle tucked under the knee or femur of the other leg. Some people can't manage this unless their knees are pretty high off the floor, where they tend

to get in the way of the right hand trying to eat. One remedy is to sit cross-legged with one of your ankles on top of the knee, instead of under it, which will force that knee down lower toward the floor; the other remedy is to master the other two positions and to forget this one. The second position is to sit with most of your weight rocked over onto your left hip, perhaps with support from your left hand on the floor; in this position your knees are together, right above left, and your feet are off to the right and behind you more or less. This position is rather common among American women who wear tight or short skirts to parties where there aren't enough chairs; me, I can't do it without falling over. The third position is similar to the first, in a way, which makes it easy to shift from one to the other with a minimum of creaking of joints: the left foot is flat on the floor, with the left knee up in the air more or less directly above it; the right foot is tucked under the archway formed by the left leg, with the rest of the right leg flat on the floor to leave plenty of maneuvering room for the right arm. For a little added stability, you can curl your left hand around your upraised left leg; but for heaven's sake don't touch your foot with your hand. Try each of these positions for a minute or two each, several times each day, starting immediately. The time will be well spent, for it takes quite a while to limber up certain muscles required for assuming the various positions necessary for living in South Asia. While you're at it, try sleeping on the floor, too, with only a blanket or two under you (pillows under the head are permissible); the floor is where most South Asians sleep, though usually without blankets under them, and those who sleep on beds (they do in student hostels, for example) sleep on beds that are rather harder than ours are (usually a quilt-like pad over planks); this exercise will prepare you for that. Now back to eating.

On certain occasions in South Asia guests are served on leaves, which are used only once and then discarded, thus assuring one that one's 'dishes' are clean. (This also helps to keep South Asia clean, as usually the discarded leaves are immediately picked up by passing or waiting cows, for recycling.) The leaves are rinsed in running water before they are placed in front of guests, of course. Banana leaves are usually preferred; lotus leaves are generally quite expensive and used only on special occasions; in some parts plates are made by pinning together several leaves of certain types, using small twigs, splints of bamboo, or the dried veins of other leaves.

Families in South Asia generally serve themselves on brass (common in lower-class families), stainless steel (particularly popular in the South), stone (for certain ceremonial occasions), and china. Northern hotels mostly use china or leaves; southern hotels often use metalware also.

The staple (the rice, chapati, puri, or paratha) is placed on the plate, leaf, or whatever, often by the host or a servant, but sometimes by the guest. If you're to help yourself to anything at the beginning of a meal, this is the one time when you can do so with your right hand; but once your right hand has conveyed food to your mouth (and gotten some of your saliva on it), you must not use it for serving anything (if you do, no one else will be able to take any of it because you have polluted it). The only exception is where everyone is eating from the same serving dish.

The curries and other side dishes may be served directly onto the 'main plate,' or they may be served in small individual cups, bowls, or small plates of china, metal, or unfired clay.

Suppose the staple is rice. You'll probably be astounded at the amount of rice you'll be given, so if you aren't to serve yourself, be sure to ask for just a small portion (you can claim you're not terribly hungry or something); in all likelihood you'll still get more than you can eat.

Often the first thing South Asians will do is run their finger through their rice to pick out any tiny stones that may be in it (there's nothing more startling than to bite down on a stone you weren't expecting, and nothing spoils an otherwise pleasant meal like sitting on the edge of your chair in fear of discovering one). But this search operation is a somewhat crass thing to do, and you wouldn't want to offend your hosts; so be sure to take your cue from them: if they don't do it, don't you. Besides, you're apt to bum your fingers doing it.

Next, there may be ghee (Tamil neiy). The standard gloss for this in English is 'clarified butter', but nobody ever heard of that. It's made by melting butter and keeping it over a low heat until all the water is driven off, and then straining out the solids that sink to the bottom. It makes a tremendous improvement in the flavor of any South Asian meal; so don't miss it if it's served; you just spoon or pour it over the rice. It's expensive stuff, so don't be surprised if it's not there; and be considerate of your hosts and take only a couple of tiny spoonfuls of it, until you see how much they take. If you're given your own individual ghee pot, though, you've no need to be so conservative.

Next, if you're in the North, there'll be dal (Hindi-Urdu, Nepali daal), which comes in various colors and consistencies (usually yellow). You pour it over the rice (using your right hand if you haven't started eating; and your left hand if you have), and then proceed to the curries.

In the South things will go a bit differently. There'll be a rice-with-curry course, rice-with-saambaar course, maybe a lentil soup course, and a rice-with-rasam course, possibly not in that order, and possibly with some of them omitted. Rasam is called pepper-water in English, which pretty well describes it; it's a very thin, highly spiced broth, usually designed to bum your taste-buds to insensibility. If you get hold of some really powerful rasam, you can temper the hotness by mixing some ghee or curd (rhymes with bird; it's like yogurt) with the rice/rasam mixture; usually, though, both rasam and saambaar are taken without ghee. Saambaar is essentially rasam with dal in it, although the spices will be different.

Now a word about which fingers of your right hand you use for eating. This is one of the many features of South Asian culture that vary from region to region. The Nepalis, Panjabis, and other Indians of the northwest tend to view this particular variation as a case of increasing sloppiness and as a case of people putting on airs more and more as you go north and west; the northeasters are clearly caught in the middle, and tend to view themselves as the middle-of-the-roaders in this, with their neighbors to the west and south as exponents of the two extremes. Being external to all this interregional mutual disparagement, however, we can simply catalog the differences, learn them, and let it go at that.

In the North and West you use only the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand for touching food, and you don't get food particles on these fingers above the first joint from the tips (that is, this is as far as you're allowed to 'dig in'). In the North and further East, use the thumb and first three fingers, and only up to the second joint on the fingers (still the first joint for the thumb, though).

In the South, it's the thumb and all four fingers, all the way up to the knuckles (you'll see some people compressing rice balls in the right palm, but don't necessarily follow suit; it's a substandard, very low-class thing to do). There's clearly a problem here in pinpointing the boundaries between the areas where this or that rule applies. Transition areas are one of the facts of life in South Asia, and sometimes the most surprising things can happen in them; but I can't do more than warn you to watch the people around you and take your cues from them. Be careful, of course, not to make the mistake of thinking that everyone around you has good manners: there are ill-mannered people in South Asia as there are here, and on top of that many of the people you see will be 'immigrants' from other regions with different customs. When in doubt, be on your best behavior; if you're someone's guest, it's probably all right to ask discreetly how something is done, if you haven't seen them doing it yet. A good way to approach this is by asking them to contrast their way of doing it with the 'way they do it somewhere else,' for example; don't believe anything they tell you about how it's done in other parts (they may know less about that than you do), but pay close attention to how they say they do it in their own area (and then watch them closely for the rest of the meal to see if that's the way they do it in unguarded moments).

So you're facing a mound of rice ringed by little dollops of curries, chutneys, sliced onions, fried things, and so on, and wondering how to get it inside you. You take a bit of any side-item in the prescribed fingers, add it to a bit of rice, and knead the two gently against the plate with your fingertips, mixing them together. This is essential if you want to get the proper taste, because the flavor of the side-dish must be mixed into the rice (which taste blah otherwise). Then you pick up this little ball of rice and flavoring and hold it in a trough made by the first two (or three, if permissible in your area) fingers of your right hand; balancing it there, convey it close to your mouth and then slide it off into your mouth with your thumb, just like shooting marbles. It's remarkably easy, as you'll soon agree after only a little practice.

If the staple isn't rice, then it's probably made of unleavened wheat flour. Chapatis are round, flat, and baked over glowing coals. Parathas are a bit different, triangular in shape and a bit heavier, cooked on a hot griddle. Puris are deep-fried and are puffed up and hollow when they first come out, though they may deflate on cooling if they weren't fried crisp. Then there's a bread-like naan and various other things, all of them delicious when eaten correctly.

The method of eating with all of these is the same. You grasp the corner of the thing with the thumb and either of the first or second fingers of the right hand, hold it down with the other of those two fingers, and tear off a smallish piece; the puris may be brittle enough for you to break

off a piece in one such motion, but with the others you'll have to grasp and tear several times, working across the things as though your fingers were a pair of scissors.

Once you get a piece of it torn off, you use it to pick up a morsel of side-dish (as though the piece of wheat-cake were a pot holder); carry the whole thing up to your mouth, and push it in with you thumb. Don't worry about getting side-dish juice on your fingertips.

While I'm on food, I should tell you about South Asian roasted corn-on-the-cob. It's what we call field-corn here; its kernels are much firmer than those of our sweet-corn. You hold the ear of corn in your left hand and pick off the kernels with your right thumb, working along a row from left to right and catching the kernels in your cupped right fingers. When you get a dozen or so in your fingers, bring them up to your mouth and carefully slide them in with your right thumb. Whatever you do, don't eat it off the cob with your teeth (the standard way in our culture), because this is a very ill-mannered in South Asia (it's the way children do it, until it's trained out of them).

There may be a small chili-pepper and some salt. Your hosts may dip the chili into the salt and take a nibble of it from time to time while working on the corn; you may want to try it, too, though you may not become partial to it.

In certain parts of South Asia, bless their hearts, people drink prodigious quantities of water, soft drinks, tea, or coffee at meals; this is probably the only place in the world outside the United States where you're sometimes served a big (immense, I should say) glass of cold water as soon as you sit down in a restaurant (I mean hotel). If they don't give you any water, you can ask for it--it's your right, and you'll probably be surprised at how much liquid you'll feel like drinking. And don't be embarrassed to go through your water disinfecting ritual even right there at the table. Better safe than sorry. Better yet, almost any place that serves hot food also serves soft drinks and hot (scalding) tea or coffee. The liquid is just as wet as water, and the sugar in the soft drink, tea, or coffee reduces the pepper-burn in your mouth.

If you've touched food with your right hand, of course, then you always pick up the glass with your left hand, so as not to get food on the glass; unless you're eating with Muslims (or Marwaris, who in my experience apparently don't mind that). Feel free to call for more tea or coffee as often as you like, especially at the end of the meal, when many South Indians prefer to have their tea or coffee. But be careful for the first few days, as the food may have a tendency to swell inside you if you add too much tea or coffee, which will make you feel uncomfortable. In the North, the meal will very often be preceded or followed by a 'sweet'. I should warn you that South Asian sweets are to most Americans the most incredibly sweet things imaginable; on top of that, as often as not they're dripping with sugar syrup, so that you have to pop the whole thing into your mouth at once. Personally, I go into ecstasy over Indian and Nepali sweets, but I'm aware that many Americans don't share my enthusiasm. I can only say that, in the interest of good manners and international relations, you really should learn to eat at least one of them at

a sitting, for they're highly prized by hosts and almost invariably served to their guests. Delicious.

In the South, the meal is usually completed with a course of rice and curds, with salt on top if you like. Southerners are less fond of sweets as a rule. Often they find room enough for this mixture of rice and curds to equal the size of the meal they've just completed. How they do this is beyond me, but their liking for the mixture isn't: it's great. This mixture generally appears to be about sixty percent liquid, yet they pick up every last drop in the fingers of their right hand without the least inconvenience, though not without a good deal of appreciative slurping. The hand technique for this is something that can be acquired only through imitation--if then; but the slurping is a cinch for even the rankest beginner.

When the meal is over, a place will be provided where you can rinse your mouth and hands in running water. As your left hand doesn't touch food (except possibly those dry wheat deals), you needn't rinse it. The water may run from a faucet ("tap" in local English), or someone may pour it for you from a container, or you may be expected to take the container in your left hand and pour the water yourself. Whichever the case, most Indians and Nepalis don't rub their two hands together under the running water right away: according to the rules, your left hand doesn't need rinsing, so just rub the fingers of your right hand back and forth against each other under the running water until all food particles have been washed away (then you can rub both hands together if you wish). Now here's where the 'clean enough' part comes in: in South Asia your hands are now clean enough, which means clean. You'll undoubtedly have an oily feeling on the fingers of your right hand (South Asians use a lot of oil in their cooking), they'll probably be somewhat discolored from the turmeric, and there may be some food particles under your fingernails and a fairly strong aroma of spices, but don't worry about that, you're clean. Often soap is provided, which helps get rid of the oiliness.

You should feel entirely free to cup your right hand and catch some water to slurp and rinse out your mouth with; you spit it back out again and then take a quick whisk at your mouth with your wet right hand, to tidy up. Nearly everyone makes a practice of this, so join 'em; not doing so is considered unclean. Many people also feel that you should massage your teeth and gums at this time, using the wet right forefinger.

You'll quickly catch onto the way of holding your hand after eating and after rinsing, until it's dry: palm and thumb horizontal, fingertips vertical and pointing downward. It's a good idea always to carry a handkerchief in a left-hand pocket (local women often tuck their handkerchiefs under the waistband at the left side of their sari, or in their clutch-bag if they carry one--college women always do), to dry your fingers on if no towel is provided. It'll quickly get stained yellow, but the washerfolk will take out the stain (you probably can't, so save your lace and Irish linen for when you go to a Western-style restaurant--the washerfolk are hard on fine fabrics).

So the main rules are these: (1) only the right hand can be used for conveying food to your mouth; (2) except in Muslim homes, if your right hand has touched your mouth, you mustn't use

it to serve yourself from any plate or vessel which serves others besides you; (3) except in Muslim homes, it's permissible to serve yourself with your left hand; I should make it clear, though, that in many parts of India it is considered bad manners to use the left hand at all during meals (there's usually a servant or relative present to serve you, anyway), so it's better in those parts to ask for what you need; (4) plain water has cleaning powers in South Asia which only a self-cleaning oven could claim in our culture, and you'll never be truly happy there until you can believe it (take my word for it, it's nearly true; that should make it easier to believe).

Throughout much of South Asia, the rules for eating rest on time-honored custom. But Muslims in India and Pakistan are provided with written rules regarding adab (manners) including the adab of eating, derived ultimately from the revelations, life, and teachings of the prophet Muhammed. The following adab of eating has been taken from *Fazail-e-A'maal* (a main Tablighi text), *Adab-e-Zindagi* (a guide for youth by a Jam'aat-e-Islami leader), and *Sahih ul-Bukhari* (the most authentic collection of the Prophet's Hadiths).

Eating, like all actions, should begin with "Bismillah" (In the name of God) and end with "Al-hamdulillah" (the praise belongs to God). One should wash one's hands (right hand first) and rinse one's mouth before and after the meal. Food should be taken only with the right hand, only with the thumb, index, and middle fingers, and only up to the second joint. This includes taking bread, meat, etc. from a common plate after one has begun eating. One's glass should also be held in one's right hand, although one can use one's left hand if supporting the bottom of the glass with the right. A *dasturkhan* (tablecloth) should be put out under the food, separate from whatever cloth or mat one is sitting on. All scraps, fruit peelings, bones, etc. should be put on the *dasturkhan*. Frequently, Muslims eat from one big common plate. You should eat from your side only, but if there are different foodstuffs in different parts of the plate, you may reach over. Leave the food in the center of the plate for last, as this is where God's blessing descends on the food. All food on the plate should be finished. This includes any food that spills onto the *dasturkhan* or floor. Leftovers are eaten by the Devil. You should lick all your fingers clean before washing your hands, as you never know which food on your hands contains the blessing.

Don't lean on anything while eating. There are three acceptable ways to sit while eating. The best way is to lay one's left foot flat on its side and sit on it, then put one's right foot flat on the ground with one's right knee in the air, and then, wrapping one's right arm around one's right leg, feed oneself with the right hand. It is also acceptable to sit with one's legs crossed or off to one's right side.

Eat what you like and leave what you don't, but don't criticize any of the food. Everyone should eat together. One should lean over one's food and concentrate on eating and not talking, but one should not remain silent during the meal. It is best to remember God, who has provided the meal. If you finish before the others, take some food and pick at it to give company to the others. Eat lightly. The Prophet has said, "The food of two is sufficient for three, and the food of three is sufficient for four."

Wait for hot food to cool, and don't blow on it to make it cool. Don't breathe into vessels of water, milk, etc. Don't drink in one big gulp. Take at least three breaths while drinking a glass of water. Rinse your mouth after drinking milk. Everything should be cleaned and the dasturkhan folded before you get up. When eating snacks, fruits, etc., don't take more than one at a time without your eating companion's permission. Don't enter a mosque after eating garlic or onions. Use miswah (a tooth stick) after eating. It is forbidden for Muslims to eat with vessels or utensils made of or decorated with silver or gold, and to eat meat from animals slaughtered by anyone other than a Muslim, Christian, or Jew.

While these are hard and fast rules for eating etiquette, they are not universally practiced, and you will see all kinds of variations. Hopefully, with this knowledge, the various ways of approaching food will be more interesting, and you'll have some context for interpreting the behaviors you see.

We come now to the most delicate and potentially revolting section of this paper, which deals with defecation. I wouldn't burden you with this if it weren't necessary, but it is. Sooner or later you'll be in a situation where you'll have to know this, and probably nobody else will tell you. More than that, though: if you force yourself to overcome your culture-bound dread of the subject and try what I'm about to describe, you'll quickly find that you were wrong to reject the idea out of hand; you'll find that the South Asian way works, and that it's better in South Asia than the American way is in South Asia. I guarantee it.

Hardly anywhere in South Asia (outside the fancy hotels) do you find a Western-style toilet. What you find is depicted in three styles in the sketches on the next page; there are other styles, but you get the idea. Number one is often referred to as a 'sanitary latrine,' as it can be flushed (either from an overhead tank or from a hand dipper). The first thing you notice is the porcelain "pan," which may be round or shaped like a keyhole. The lower edge of each of the sketches, by the way, represents the front of porcelain or cement or brick. Often there's a tap (faucet) right there, and there should be a pot or some other vessel for water; if there's no tap right there, there will be one somewhere nearby. Before you get going on this, it's essential to make sure you have a pot full of water handy (you may have to bring your own from your room).

The essentials of the operation are the same no matter what style of equipment you have. You face the front, with one foot on each rest, and squat down with your feet flat, that is, with your heels on the footrests. American kids around two years old do this automatically when they want to pick up something from the floor; they seem to outgrow it in a few years, perhaps because they don't see anyone older doing it. The result is that this is a difficult exercise for most Americans: the tendons at the back of the legs grow shorter over a period of time if they're not called on to stretch for the squatting position.

So here's another calisthenics for you to practice for the rest of the summer, along with your floor-sleeping and floor-sitting postures. Start out by crouching down, with your heels off the floor, like a baseball catcher. You won't be able to hold this position long, because the calf

muscles will get tired. So right away begin to lower yourself further, leaning forward and holding your arms out in front of you as you do, so you'll stay in balance. Pretty soon there you'll be, in a perfect squatting position and about to fall over backwards any second. Go ahead, fall over, and then practice a couple of sitting postures for a few minutes, and then try the squatting exercise again. You may find that you can squat rather well if your feet are way far apart and your toes pointing outward; this is cheating, because the position of the footrests doesn't allow for this, so take that as your starting point and gradually work your feet inward toward each other. A few weeks of this stuff for a few minutes several times a day will do the job for you, and you'll be so grateful later on that you put in the time practicing. Once you've got the knack of keeping your balance in a full squat, train yourself to hold the position for longer and longer periods of time, with say five minutes as your goal (if you get that far, don't stop!); this staying power will be of immense value when you get diarrhea.

This position is the toughest part of excretion South Asian style; the actual physical process comes naturally, and don't worry if you happen to 'miss', because water is the remission for all sins. And the next step comes easy, too; I learned it from watching children defecating over an open sewer, and here's how it's done. One fills the cup, dipper, pot, or whatever with water and leans somewhat farther forward, then with the right hand pours the water behind one so that starting at about one's tailbone, it runs between the buttocks. One swishes the water about the anal area with the fingers of the left hand, and finally uses a bit more of the water for rinsing the left hand. You'll find that there's really no need to do more about your left hand than just that (this will help you to know whether you're doing it right), but of course there's nothing wrong with washing with soap thereafter, if it'll put your mind more at ease. Be very careful not to let your foot slip as you stand up. If there's an over-head tank for flushing, I hope you're better than I am at making the !*?# contraption work; if it won't work for you either, or if there isn't any, then use the dipper to flush the pan clean, and you may want to flush the whole area around the pan as well.

For a short time afterward you'll feel a little water trickling down between your legs; this wouldn't do in America, but in South Asia you'll have the company of several hundred million other residents to make you feel better about it, and very soon you won't even notice it anymore.

A word is in order about the evils of toilet paper in South Asia. Most plumbing systems aren't designed to cope with it and will clog very readily if it's used. This probably won't inconvenience you, but the next person who uses the toilet may not be able to flush it if you've put toilet paper down it. This is a very effective way to get people permanently mad at you. So be flexible, join the crowd.

On trains, the toilet is depicted in number two; the whole thing is a unit, stamped out of a single sheet of stainless steel. The front view shows a large cup for rinsing, but in real life these have all been stolen, so be sure to take along a metal drinking glass when you go on a lengthy train trip.

Flushing is accomplished by pressing a spring-loaded lever valve several feet above the floor; this will continue to flush as long as you depress the lever.

Number three is one notch lower on the desirability scale, the "service latrine," which is found in middle-class homes particularly in smaller localities, and in some rural homes. You'll notice that this number features several things absent in the other two models. The 'service' part means that someone makes the rounds and collects the feces, which is used for fertilizer; it should be as dry as possible, for ease in collection, so the urine does not go the same way--it runs down the sloping floor to a drainage hole, and from there into a sink-pit. The same applies to the rinse-water, which is why there are three footrests in this model: one pair to support the user while rinsing. With the service latrine, it's quite important that no urine or rinse-water go down with the feces, which in the nature of the case is a social transgression at which you will ultimately be found out. And this is another reason for not using toilet paper: sooner or later your awful secret will become known--and the fertilizer people won't care for it one bit either.

While we're on the subject of cleanliness, here are four other things South Asians find dirty about Americans (the first being that they use toilet paper instead of water), Americans don't brush their teeth before breakfast, they don't clean their tongues, they don't always bathe every morning, and they use their handkerchief for blowing their nose, "saving" their phlegm and putting it in their pocket.

Brushing teeth is no problem for us in South Asia (just be sure to do it before breakfast if there's anybody watching)--you can readily get good toothbrushes and good toothpastes. If you want to try roughing it, though, use neem twigs (you can buy them for next to nothing in the market). These are smooth round sticks about 3/8 inch in diameter with one end slightly frayed; you use them like a toothbrush, only without any dentifrice--the natural juices in the twig take care of that, they say. It tastes bitter as sin, but it does get your teeth pretty clean, and think how brave and strong you'll feel.

Tongue-cleaning is a curiosity that I must confess even I haven't availed myself of, but many people in South Asia swear by it and feel everybody else should too. It's done with a thin strip of plastic or aluminum maybe eight inches long and a quarter of an inch wide, held with one end in each hand, bent into a tight U and thrust back into the throat while the tongue is thrust out. It seems to be necessary to exert a rather strong pressure on the back of the tongue, judging from the sounds that result. And while you're scraping your tongue down for the day's activities, it's a good time to make sure your nasal and pectoral tracts are quite clear; into the sink with it, for water washes away all (and you may not have to use your handkerchief all day).

Bathing is part of the morning ritual in the strictest sense: a morning bath before breakfast is as essential to the day's work as getting out of bed. People bathe standing up or squatting, and most of them don't take showers. They bathe by pouring water over themselves from a dipper or brass pot. There are many decided advantages to this method of bathing. For one thing, you get the water exactly where you want it, instead of having to dodge and contort to catch the

spray from a shower. Two, you don't get water where you don't want it, like on your hair; most shower heads point straight down, making it hard to keep your hair dry. Three, you can get wet at your own speed, which I think is important when you're dealing with cold water in the wintertime. In the warm weather a cold-water bath is very bracing, very quick and extremely easy to enjoy; I take them several times a day in the hot season. You get yourself wet all over, rub lightly with soap, massage a bit, and then rinse off. The whole thing's over in about two minutes, and it's really very refreshing.

You can see this method demonstrated at any public tap, and you'll be impressed by the way Indians and Nepalis can take a complete bath and change into dry clothing without committing indecent exposure, in full public view at all times. I should mention that in most South Asian subcultures the concept of indecent exposure is based on the same body-parts as American laws, but that term also applies even to situations where only members of one's own sex are present, so a word of caution. And incidentally, men of your class shouldn't appear in short pants or barechested (just having a towel around your neck is sufficient evidence of your good faith); neither should women, of course.

The chord I've been striking throughout this paper has been that, while a given culture or subculture has a particular standard by which human behavior is judged correct or incorrect, there's no meaningful way to judge that standard itself by contrasting it with the standard of another culture or subculture; a given standard has validity only within the organization which uses it; so you can't presume to pass judgment on a particular pattern or rule of behavior if you don't understand how it's used and why it's the standard.

The case where two different cultures take dissimilar stands on a particular aspect of human behavior is a phenomenon I call cultural mismatch. It's fun to collect instances of cultural mismatch, and spotting them is an easy habit to get into. You'll probably be surprised at how much such a conscious habit will do for your understanding of your own culture. I heartily recommend it.

I've been trying to tell how to follow certain essential behavior patterns in South Asia; you yourselves will begin to see the why of it all soon after you become adept in these patterns. In all cases, they 'work'. In most cases, they work famously well. And as the pragmatist said, whatever works, does work. So that's part of it. And the rest is easy, too, though it may madden you from time to time: arbitrary convention. Most patterns in a particular society are standard because the adult members of the society were taught to follow them from early childhood; they learned them before they were old enough to question their cosmic validity, and now they're so natural to them that they wouldn't think of not requiring them of their own children and all other members in good standing of the society.