

NAMASTE, THE MOST FAVOURED GREETING IN COVID TIMES

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It is only after the recent ravages of the coronavirus that much of the world suddenly realised the virtues of the Indian cultural trademark called ‘namaste’. In the past, foreigners were often surprised or upset when they extended their hand to Indians for a friendly shake, only to be greeted by two palms of the hands joined together, fingers pointing upwards.

This indicated rather decisively that touch was foreclosed. But then, the handshake is less physical when compared to the hug, often quite tight, that many cultures insist on. Kissing on the cheek and even on the lips are well accepted as greetings, even among the same gender. Rubbing noses is a must among cultures like those of the Inuits, known earlier as Eskimos, and among Maoris in faraway New Zealand. Thus, many cultures enjoin a close proximity of bodies or limbs as essential gestures of friendliness.

Indian culture and Southeast Asian cultures profoundly influenced by India are the only ones that stay far away from physical touch and hugging. The very sanitised namaste, namaskar or ‘Anjali Mudra’ becomes the wai in Thailand, the sembah in Indonesia and the sampeah in Cambodia. To understand why Indians are averse to physical contact with strangers and all outside their immediate circle of family and friends, we need to appreciate the overriding concept of purity and pollution in traditional Indian civilisation that impacted later religions on Indian soil, like Islam and Christianity, to a considerable extent.

Hinduism, like other non-Abrahamic Indian religions, insists that the touch of the hand or fingers, especially while eating when saliva overflows in the mouth, contaminates all food except one’s own. This had made little sense to outsiders in the past, but after Covid-19 ravaged the world, they came to realise the inherent danger of contracting deadly diseases through touch, saliva, sneeze and droplets that involuntarily spray out the mouth while speaking. Bacteriologists and virologists can explain in greater detail why and how disease-causing microorganisms thrive more in the hot, humid tropical environment of India, which may have called for greater personal safeguards.

Leftover food was generally avoided as rot sets in rather fast. The act of touching other unknown humans or impure objects became taboo and traditional Indian culture was obsessed with precautions against touch-borne disease. We all know of how suspiciously many view water before drinking it. After all, one of the most fatal water-borne diseases in the world, cholera, is said to have travelled out of India. This explains perhaps why everyone here carries his or her own bottle of water or purchases a filtered sealed bottle, just to be sure. This rule was, of course, perverted by the pernicious caste system to prohibit the partaking of water among unequal castes, implying quite arbitrarily that the lower the caste, the less clean it was.

But is it our basic argument that personal hygiene in India was more advanced than others even a millennia or two ago, ahead of all others? Well, we make it clear that there is no intention of claiming yet another ‘first’ for ancient India as is quite fashionable now, because several of these self-congratulatory claims are not based on scientific empiricism or proven history. Besides, we cannot segregate this fetish for personal health from the nation’s abysmally poor performance in public health and its age-old failure to ensure collective cleanliness in public places.

Disease comes from both private and public hygiene, and Gandhiji focused much of his mission on this issue. After 67 years of his death, the government had to launch a major national programme to ensure more acceptable public cleanliness. There is, however, a noticeable Indian obsession with water, frequent washing and bathing, as our slippery bathrooms proclaim, but along with these come stinking urinals. Few bother about the odour as it belongs to the public space. A person’s fixation is to get rid of impure water or solids from one’s body. An orthodox Indian believes that a sneeze ejected so nauseatingly in public is more acceptable as the dirty stuff is out of the body, than if it were captured by a handkerchief, western style, and carried in one’s pocket.

While our sixth century Sushruta Samhita indicated that disease spread through touch, as did the eleventh century Ibn Sina’s Kitab-al-Shifa, major Eastern physicians could not shake the Western world’s unscientific belief in miasma (‘bad air’ or vapours) as the root of sickness and epidemics. Though all religions insisted that worshippers wash their hands, when a Hungarian physician named Semmelweis actually suggested in 1847 that doctors clean their hands before operating or treating patients, he was sent to a mental hospital where he died tragically.

Around this time, John Snow demonstrated the connection between London's cholera epidemic and contaminated water. Over the next few decades, Western science gradually came to learn of the existence of 'germs' and 'bacteria' and then 'contact' became the villain of infection. It was only in the closing years of that century that pseudo-living micro-particles defined as viruses were discovered.

While Indians are glad that Covid made many foreigners realise why the Indian namaste is a sensible thing, our country has more to offer. Some day, toilet paper guzzling societies may discover the sheer comfort of using water at the right place.