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Establishing a bond with Tamil, Arabic

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A SMATTERING of words in languages other than your mother tongue can go a long way.

In fact, even a few words can make a difference between friend and foe, between a cold reception and a warm one.

My experience with one Sheikh Alowedeen last week demonstrated this aptly. I tested this when I was in Kuwait, covering the official visit of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

All the media representatives on the trip were housed at the five-star Sheraton Hotel, rebuilt extensively after the damage suffered during the Iraqi invasion in 1991.

Putting us in one hotel was most practical as this would facilitate logistics. On such visits, journalists and television crew members need to be always on the move and this can be easily done if we are grouped together.

Having us under one roof would also mean we can be reached at short notice. On this occasion we also shared the same hotel with a small group of businessmen accompanying the Prime Minister.

Sheikh Alowedeen was from the Housekeeping Department and was responsible for keeping my room on the third floor clean.

I made Sheikh Alowedeen's acquaintance when he was wheeling his trolley laden with towels, shampoo, soap and other toileteries on his rounds.

After the usual hello, I enquired whether he was a local. He told me that he was from Madras, India. When I asked whether he could speak Tamil, he replied with a yes and this encouraged me to say a few words in Tamil.

Sheikh Alowedeen's eyes brightened up and out came a barrage in Tamil, greeting me warmly and asking all sorts of questions. Our initial greetings were in English but this immediately gave way to Tamil.

Unfortunately, my Tamil is very limited (and rusty as well) - unlike my colleague Zainon Ahmad who speaks the language most eloquently.

If one is to listen to Pak Non, as Zainon is fondly known, in Tamil without looking at who was talking (such as over the telephone), one would think that one is speaking to a true-blue Indian!

If I recall correctly, Sheikh Alowedeen had been in Kuwait for several years, making a decent living as an employee of the hotel. To him, I was not an ordinary hotel guest. Being able to converse with him in Tamil, albeit in an extremely limited manner, had won me his friendship even though it was brief.

From that day onwards, Sheikh Alowedeen was always helping me with little things. My room was tidied up promptly, there were always fresh fruits in the basket, my laundry was done immediately and my complaint of no-colour registration on my television set was tended to satisfactorily.

It wasn't the tip that got me this VIP treatment. I'm sure that a fat tip would buy me the same kind of attention. I've seen it happen before. I've also experienced the same thing. But when another guest gave a bigger tip, I have been relegated and made to wait. That's life, I guess.

Before I left for Kuwait, I picked up a few Arabic words. But I wasn't confident enough to pronounce them in public. Finally, when I was alone with Hassan, I meekly uttered a few words which delighted the driver.

Hassan is a strapping 27-year-old from Somalia and has been in Kuwait for six years. He claimed his wife was working and studying in London while several brothers and a sister were in Somalia.

Life in Kuwait is good, he said, and he is able to conduct his daily prayers in peace.

Hassan's colleague, Feisal, a pot-bellied Tanzanian, is less talkative. The two of them were responsible for taking us to all our destinations.

They were very keen in taking us to wherever we wanted to go, whether to go shopping at the bazaar or to the guest palace where Dr Mahathir stayed.

My few choice words in Arabic earned me a simple souvenir - two verses from the Quran written on a wooden plaque. One of the verses touches on one's allegiance to God and the other on the need to seek help only from Him and none other.

Can Sheikh Alowedeen speak Arabic? When I asked him, he said he was still picking up a few words and phrases here and there.

He was not quite like another driver from Bangalore whose name I can't recall. This fellow has stayed in Kuwait for 22 years and speaks Arabic as fluently as the next Kuwaiti.

I was told it's not difficult to pick up other languages. A close friend of mine said it was best to pick up the bad words first and take it from there.

I tried this out but was given a bar of soap by my Indian neighbour when I first tried to master the Tamil language. I guess I'll just have to persevere...

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