

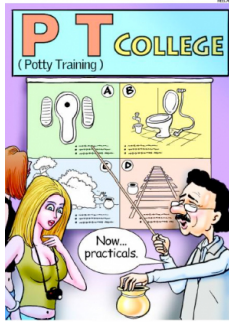
Home > Society > Potty talk and other tips

SOCIETY

Potty talk and other tips

Sharmila Ganesan Ram | December 25, 2010

Like 80 Tweet



Not many men can enter a rural Indian loo wearing trousers, belt and tie. Wilbur Sargunaraj is even sporting sunglasses. As he squats unaesthetically in his trademark black-and-white attire, the oily-haired Tamilian misleadingly invites a cameraman inside, and locks the door. His purpose, however, is not to defecate but to educate. "Some people sit like this," he says deadpan, facing the potty hole. "It is incorrect," he adds, referring to the direction and not the fact that his pants are still on. "You should aim for the hole and finish your business."

It is tempting to dismiss Sargunaraj, who later in the video goes on to explain the use of the "latrine mug" and also the reason why Indians don't use the left hand while greeting, as a mere online joke. But his statistics make him vital. This dark, moustachioed gentleman who speaks

English in Tamil, boasts a serious worldwide following, with more than 12, 000 fans on Facebook and a whopping 22, 00, 000 views on his Youtube videos so far. Both foreign and local media now hail Sargunaraj - who has been trying to save tourists from certain common, potentially embarrassing situations for almost three years - as India's first Youtube star.

Not only do Sargunaraj's myriad videos attempt to help foreign tourists, who may feel awkward enquiring about toilet manners and other things native, but also Indians who, for instance, would like to know how to place an order for a burger in a drive-through Burger King outlet. "Number eleven is veggie burger," he exclaims in the video, while reading out what, according to him, is the "Wooper" burger menu. Through his series of popular and sometimes unintentionally funny videos, this curious 32-year-old Indian has become an unlikely online ambassador for what's known as 'cultural intelligence'. "It means humbly learning about and adapting to an alien culture," says the musician from Madurai, who also has a base in Canada.

While flying for the first time, Sargunaraj did not know how to use the Airbus 380 lavatory - a phenomenon that baffles many first-time-flyers in his country. So he decided to enlighten them by bringing every such cultural nugget that he picked up while travelling to his charity concerts into the public domain (pun not intended). "I wanted to unravel some of the concepts behind Cultural Quotient," says this Tamilian, who did not mind becoming a spectacle in the course. As a result, his Youtube service, 'Supercall Solutions', was born.

As part of this service, Sargunaraj offers unmistakable videos titled 'Field Trips' to his audience. Each of these trips begins with a sing-song rendition of his quite-amouthful name followed by some easy as well as uneasy cultural lessons. While a few were inspired by genuine e-mail queries, most videos like 'How to wakeboard' or 'How to use an elevator' were spontaneous. There's one, for instance, in which Sargunaraj tries to learn a few German words from a Tamilian. The result is a hilarious camaraderie. In another video, he learns how to greet a member of the Masai tribe in Africa even as cows ruminate in the background while yet another one shows him driving a maatuvaandi (Tamil for bullock cart) in his hometown.

In many ways, the self-proclaimed "global citizen" is India's answer to Borat, the jolly Kazakh journalist in the film of the same name, whose attempts to learn the polite ways of American life lead to disgustingly hilarious situations. But Sargunaraj doesn't take this as a compliment. "The only thing that may sound like Borat is the accent although I think even my accent is a bit different. We are also very different in our purpose," clarifies the energetic member of Singapore's cultural intelligence department. "My aim is to make the common extraordinary." Sargunaraj's broken English ("very very similarities"), liberal use of Tamil (Vanakkam is a constant greeting) and tendency to introduce sections like 'Terminology' (for new words) in his videos make him an oddly endearing character - perhaps a desi version of Mr Bean, if not Borat.

His recent single 'Love Marriage', in which he pleads with his parents for a love marriage while dancing atop coconut husks, is now a Youtube legend. It saw over 100, 000 views the first week and has now sailed past 600, 000. "The lady featured in the video (Rajmani Aeca) is an amazing person who smiles through her difficulties. She doesn't even know she's on YouTube," reveals Sargunaraj, who has been helping the villagers in the video get access to basic amenities like electricity and medicines, and even hopes to cash in on his publicity to provide further help.

Sargunaraj's obsession with the ordinary is understandable. "I was born simple and I am still simple," says the man who spent a better part of his childhood in Madurai. His NRI cousins from the Middle East, who would bring western music CDs every time they visited, sowed the seeds of music in him: "I fell in love with drums." As a student of Jeevana school in Madurai, Sargunaraj would even gather all the boys to beat the desk "in Dappankoothu (local Tamil Nadu beats) style" and could fashion makeshift drumsticks from branches.

At times, though, it is Sargunaraj who has to face the music. Although he boasts many crazy fans who forward his videos (one even sent him an email saying his music helped her fight suicidal thoughts), some Indian viewers, he is aware, feel that his picture of India is an exaggerated one. "They think it's not a true depiction of India," he says, referring to the rural toilettraining video in particular. "If they have never been to a village or experienced a latrine like this, then I need to make more videos to educate them!" he exclaims in an e-mail conversation, adding that the one in the video is "a very high-class latrine".

In addition, there's also the perpetual debate online over Sargunaraj's identity - is he for real or is his accent, name and vocabulary a part of online make-up? "Of course, Wilbur is a real person," he says, referring to himself in third person. "It is my legal name and if I were just a viral character, you would not see me going to different places and helping people. What would Lady Gaga say if people asked her if she is her real self?"

His latest single 'Simple Superstar' chronicles his life in five minutes. To promote it, the bachelor will be coming to his hometown early next year. "My message to the world is to focus on quality, not quantity," he says. "Develop your character, not just your bank account." Sargunaraj will soon celebrate other ordinary things, among them 'How to peel a coconut' and 'How to get blessings from an elephant'.

It's a wonder why, despite the many girls online who claim they want to marry him, Sargunaraj is still single. "I want a love marriage," he confesses. In many cultures, Mr Sargunaraj, that may not be an intelligent thing to do.

POPULAR ON TIMES CREST

IN THIS SECTION ENTIRE WEBSITE

Fashion in India

December 19, 2010
Fashion in India, post Independence, is more about fabric and less about style, observes Rasna Behl, who started modelling in 1968.

Resisting violence

December 18, 2010
Authorities in the districts of Bengal have come up with measures to tackle student violence.

Sanskrit: Classic tale of Neglect

June 14, 2010
Sanskrit and other Indian classical languages are links to our collective heritage. But by 2050, when India would have become the world's most...

More in this Section >

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF CURRENCY FLUCTUATION

YOUR INVESTMENT	EUR/USD	PROFIT / LOSS
1000 €	1.4450	0 €

Trade Forex Now >

MARKETS.COM

FROM THE TIMES OF INDIA

LATEST MOST POPULAR

1. Unseen Hitler photos sold at British auction
2. Injured US Congresswoman to be moved to new medical facility
3. Saudi says Ben Ali barred from politics while in kingdom
4. Air Force to set up defence radar station in Mizoram
5. Mayawati sacks minister for forgery, irregularities

More from The Times of India >

PROFILES

Still going strong, at 75
Bharatanatyam is not an easy dance to grow old with. At...

More Profiles >

FROM TIMES BLOGS

- Malaysia is foodie heaven**
Food in the heart of Asia.
Prasanto Kumar Roy
- IPL slavery**
India continues to be enslaved, particularly to IPL cricket.
Iqbal Siraj
- BSY factor is like a spoke in the BJP's campaign wheel**
Is BSY proving to be a big liability for the BJP?
HS Bairam

More Times Blogs >