CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

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Category: Observations

I must admit that I was a little amused to read of the performance of the British Foreign minister in India recently. The Independent called the trip a disaster and the Daily Mail (admittedly, no fan of the government) had this quote:

> *Indian officials were also dismayed by Mr Miliband's informal manner. He was said to have repeatedly addressed Pranab Mukherjee, India's 73-year-old foreign minister, by his first name.*
>
> *'He was totally tactless,' said Arundhati Ghose, India's former ambassador to the United Nations. 'It was so familiar that it is almost condescending.'*

I was amused because this is the sort of mistake that people from informal, Western societies often make when visiting other parts of the world. It is a reality that people are much more likely to remember how we behave and how we treat them than they are to remember what it is we say and it certainly seems that Mr Milliband's message has got lost in the furore about his actions. Of course, Mr Milliband is only a minister of the British Government and while important, his message is probably not of eternal consequence.

Christian missionaries, on the other hand, have a far more important message to convey and it is vitally important that they don't let their actions contradict their message. This is why language and culture learning is such a high value amongst missionaries. It's not enough to say the right things, you have to say them in the right way, too. It is vital to treat people with the appropriate degree of respect and to speak in a way that does not cause offence. If people are offended by the Gospel message, that is one thing, but if they are offended by the messenger, that is quite another.

Anyway, if Mr Milliband is thinking of making another trip to India, he might like to consider taking the Language and Culture Acquisition Course at ETP.

> *This course aims to prepare people to become effective communicators in a second language and culture. We do not teach any specific language, but rather give people tools to learn any language and culture. The course is as much about learning to learn experientially and to interact with other people as it is about learning specific facts.*