

Learning the rules of the game

The Bombay Toastmaster's Club is the city's version of the international organisation that grooms budding orators and public speakers

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Imagine a world where adults read out aloud from storybooks and wear little gold pins as a status symbol. This is the Bombay Toastmaster's Club, Maham, the city's version of the international organisation that teaches budding orators and public speakers the rules of the game.

The Club is not a post modern world, the men are simply called 'Toastmaster' while the ladies have a 'Madame' prefixed to their title. But it does practise complete equality, everyone has a designation and a specific role to play for each meeting.

The gentleman keeps tabs on the use and misuse of grammar and pronunciation. An English professor's wet dream. The Ah counter keeps tabs of the number of times an orator uses fillers like 'ah', 'umm', 'well'. You get the drift.

It may not be the most exciting job in the world, but

these guys take it very seriously. There's a timekeeper who deducts points for over extended speeches and a Sergeant at arms who calls the meeting to order. You'd be forgiven for thinking you had joined the army instead of a

group of public speakers. This alternate universe of order and discipline is planned down to the last detail and spontaneity is definitely not on the agenda. Except for the table topics round, where volunteers take

a chance in giving an extempore speech, the entire event is planned right down to the last minute.

Each meeting has a set of pre-ordained speeches. Those lucky enough to be doing the talking have gone through a

rigorous process of selection. Each would-be speaker has a mentor whom they have to impress, and who will ultimately decide if the speech is even worthy of being given floor time.

But all's well that ends well,

because the Toastmaster's Club doesn't believe in criticism, only constructive feedback. Members are not reprimanded for a bad speech; they are merely instructed on how they could have done better.

Every speaker is rewarded with a deafening applause, even if he or she was only reading out the minutes of the meeting. If this were a school, it would have the happiest bunch of kids in town.

To an outsider who thrives in a sarcastic, competitive environment, the Toastmasters seem about as familiar as Eskimos in Greenland. The level of enthusiasm doesn't fit in with the cast iron structure of the event, but the genuine warmth of the entire bunch can warm even the most cynical heart.

If there ever was a place where you didn't need to be a movie star or a politician during elections for people to care about what you have to say, this is it. Folks.



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