

## Relationships, Age and Social Interactions - Dr. Jharna Chatterjee



Sometimes I wonder about how in different cultures age and relationship affect our social interactions differently.

In India, unrelated ladies and gentlemen who are our parents' age, automatically become our 'aunts and uncles' right at the first acquaintance in a social environment. This custom has so far prevailed even in North America, even among those who belong to the second or third generation in our communities. Even teachers and professors are almost always treated as respected, [usually] older relatives, an uncle or aunt, an older brother or a sister, and usually addressed as such. (I am talking about my generation and don't exactly know how things are now, some four decades later.) Friends often become like brothers or sisters, and almost part of the family. Similarly, friends of brothers and sisters are treated as brothers or sisters, by extension – and are often seen as members of the family. Thus, you know exactly the behavioural norms such as how to address them, how to entertain them, and how to talk to them – more importantly, what not to say to them. If you go shopping in India, you can expect the shopkeeper to address you as 'older brother or sister' or 'uncle or aunt' depending on how old he or she is, and how old you are. This is quite common even in the fish-market or with the green grocer. The strangest custom is probably found on buses or local trains, where the passengers on a crowded bus or train would try to attract attention of a fellow-passenger by calling loudly, "Hey older brother/sister! Could I please go through?" This would be the equivalent of "excuse me" in Western societies, especially, if delivered with a smile. Incidentally, the phrase "Thank you" is almost never used except in very formal circumstances – it is most often expressed *in kind* by a shy, happy, grateful smile.

In the North American society, however, if I am not mistaken, treating non-relatives as relatives is not that common. Treating and addressing someone 'like a brother, sister or like parents' shows too much unwarranted intimacy, too much familiarity. There are important exceptions, of course. Our daughter's childhood friend and her sister call me Mom2 and my husband Dad2. However, in all other respect, they treat us as 'friends'.

In India, age plays a prominent role in all social interactions. Younger people do not address older/senior people by their first names; it is considered rude and insulting. In formal situations, it might be Mr. or Mrs. So and so, but in informal situations, it is always in terms of a 'concocted' relationship: uncle or aunt or older sister or brother. The minutiae of the social interaction from then on becomes prescribed by tradition, and as a rule, runs smoothly. I think there is a tendency among Indian people to gravitate towards informality – provided there is mutual comfort and both parties 'click'. I acquired a

‘brother’ thirty-six years ago in this manner who is still a very dear friend, ‘brother’ and a confidant – and he has been “adopted” by our entire family, as much as he has adopted them. My hunch is that this all-round relationship will continue for the rest of our lives.

Relationships are another compass people usually follow in their day-to-day lives. Parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts deserve unconditional respect, as do older siblings; and in their turn, they are duty-bound to provide you with unconditional affection, love and care, the benefit of their experience by protecting you from any harm that they can foresee and/or can control within their capabilities. This mutual obligation holds all life long. A parental home is *always* the home and the safe harbour for the offspring too. There is a famous story from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that illustrates the strength of this behavioural norm, especially between a father and a daughter.

A young girl was going on foot with a group of people from her village to the big city of Kolkata to be with her husband. The sun was about to set, the group had hurried and gone much ahead of her, and she could not keep up with them when they were in the middle of a large meadow infamous for troubles with robbers (dacoits). It got dark soon, and sure enough, she was confronted by a vicious-looking man who called out “Who goes there?” Thinking quickly, she replied, “Baba (Daddy), I am your daughter Saro, going to Kolkata to meet your son-in-law.” That simple address did the magic. Protectively, this uneducated brute of a man took her to his own home to his family, fed her, made her rest, and in the morning accompanied her to the end of the meadow where she would be safe to continue walking on her own. This young lady was the wife of Sri Ramakrishna, the famous devotee of Bengal. Alas, I doubt it very much, if such a sacred code of civilized conduct can be found anywhere in this world now, including India.

The two Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, abound in short episodes demonstrating such codes of conduct between parents and children, among siblings, between teachers and their students and their importance in ancient Indian society. In today’s global village, however, nuclear families and senior citizens’ residences are increasingly common even in India, whereas only fifty years ago, adult children were responsible for caring for their elderly parents and grandparents in a joint family set-up. I have heard comments from members of other cultures such as “Exploit and be exploited” to describe these arrangements, while the fact was that neither the parents nor their children could think of such arrangements as anything but normal and mutually enjoyable, even fulfilling.

In some cultures, it is quite acceptable to criticize one’s mother or father for not being the ‘ideal parent’ and giving the appreciative audience a detailed account of how one surmounted the huge challenges posed by the limitations of the ‘imperfect’ parents to grow up and become a successful and wonderful person. It is also quite acceptable to make public jokes about the parents’ ‘stupidity’, ‘stinginess’ or ‘inconsiderate’ behaviour. In some other cultures, however, no matter how old and successful someone is, it is considered an admirable quality to have enough humility to praise one’s parents for the sacrifices they had made, the values they had imparted, the skills they had taught and the personal qualities they had transmitted through their genes and loving upbringing,

and express sincere gratitude for the same all life long. Yes, there are and were exceptions, as always to be expected. But mostly, this really was the social norm in some cultures. Am I painting a Utopian picture? Perhaps, and I am painfully aware that this too is slowly disappearing from the face of earth. I reserve judgements – perhaps the new norms are more confidence-producing, and therefore, more practical. But, today's young will be tomorrow's old, and it is also possible that these norms will take a toll on the emotional well-being of both the old and the young. Only time will tell.