

THE ECONOMY OF RESPECT IN A NORTH INDIAN VILLAGE

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ABSTRACT

The economy of respect involves symbolic interaction signifying deference or esteem. The paper examines the patterning of these symbolic exchanges in a north Indian village. It describes the criteria by which villagers qualify for respect and the conventional means by which they show respect to others. Although discussion focuses primarily on the interaction of men, attention is also given to the role of women in the local economy of respect. The paper demonstrates that respect represents an important modality of social relationships and constitutes a mirror of social values as well.

INTRODUCTION

ijjat is a key word in the Hindi lexicon of social relations. Usually translated as "respect," it refers to the esteem a man enjoys among his fellows. North Indian villagers often invoke the term when referring to a prominent member of their community or explaining the deference shown some individual.

ijjat pertains especially to interactional contexts. Here it implies definite expectations between those showing respect and those receiving it. The individual who behaves in a helpful, forthright or courteous way gains respect from others, a respect exhibited in appropriate gestures and modes of speech. In short, one behaves respectfully and thereby earns respect. There is reciprocity involved: admirable conduct wins admiration and merits the symbolic tokens of respect.

As Mauss (1967:3) and Levi-Strauss (1969:62) each remind us, exchange in traditional societies embraces social as well as material values. In rural north India certain conventional forms of symbolic action convey respect, and an Indian village is the scene of a lively exchange in such behaviors.

Since reciprocity is inherent in these rural Indian usages, they are here analogized to economic transactions. This economic metaphor serves as a heuristic device throughout the following discussion. Accordingly, the symbolic exchanges whereby respect is communicated in an Indian village are called the "economy of respect."

A study of the economy of respect in a north Indian village sheds light on the character of social relationships in such communities. Moreover, such a study affords insight into the value system of rural Indians. Important values are reflected in the personal attributes that command public esteem.

This paper profiles the economy of respect in one north Indian village. The settlement in question is Garvpur, a community of 3477 located in western Uttar-Pradesh (Lapoint 1977, 1978).¹ The discussion focuses specifically on respect as a modality of social relationships and mirror of village values.

THE CONCEPT OF RESPECT

We have already said that ijjat is the favorable reputation a man acquires among his kin, neighbors and other acquaintances. Their good opinion of him will be based on one or more factors.

First comes wealth, particularly if it is channeled into approved forms of patronage. Villagers uniformly cite the importance of the monetary factor in establishing a prominent reputation.

Yet not every respected individual is affluent. Some gain recognition for their outstanding personal qualities. While these qualities are said to be an inherent part of a person's nature (prakriti), it is significant that they reveal themselves in conduct directed toward other people.

Good conduct itself merits respect. Sometimes estimable behavior is ascribed to a man's inherent nature (prakriti), but at other times the credit goes to his own efforts. In the latter case, villagers claim that respect is self-earned (apni banai).

For example, a person gains respect by showing respect to others. The conventional tokens and gestures that symbolize respect are known collectively as satkar, and exhibiting satkar towards others constitutes an important means of acquiring public regard for oneself.

Finally, there are certain purely ascriptive bases for ijjat. These include caste, kinship, age and sex. Superordination along any one of these ascriptive status dimensions entitles an individual to respect. Specifically, it entitles him to receive those signs of deference that represent satkar.

In sum ijjat is attributed to individuals on the basis of diverse criteria. Among the relevant criteria are wealth, personal qualities, good conduct, deferential behavior (satkar) and ascriptive status. In the following pages, each of these factors will be examined in order to clarify its distinctive contribution to the local economy of respect.

EARNING RESPECT

It is convenient to begin with the factor of wealth. The Garvpur villagers look up to the man who has achieved material success. His ability to increase his income or property holdings wins their commendation. Yet, it is the

use to which a man puts his fortune that determines how favorably he is regarded by his fellow villagers. The miser who refuses to help others finds no approval for his stinginess. On the other hand, people praise the man who lends assistance to the needy or devotes his funds to the betterment of the community. Patronage meets with public approbation and counts for more than riches per se.

For example, the village money lender is likely to be a respected figure in the community. Rural Indians often find it impossible to qualify for bank loans and the residents of Garvpur are no exception. They admire a well-to-do villager who offers loans at reasonable rates of interest and treats his clients fairly.

People likewise express approval of the individual who contributes funds to a worthwhile public project, such as the construction of a school or temple. One of Garvpur's most prominent citizens, for example, is a wealthy milk seller of the Gadariya or Shepherd caste. Despite his low caste status, this individual is widely admired. The villagers respect him both because he is a self-made man and because he has employed his funds in public patronage. Thus, in 1969 he sponsored the construction of the local Hanuman temple. This was an important public act and redounded to the credit of the milk seller. The philanthropist who endows a temple or sponsors a major ceremony (e.g., the ritual recitation of a major religious text, such as the Satya Narayana ki Katha or the Ramayana) invariably wins praise among the Hindus of the community. According to Hindu belief, he also accrues religious merit (punya).

Hence, ritual sponsorship is highly creditable. This is particularly true if the ceremony in question can be performed with style and a praise-worthy degree of ostentation. Weddings especially provide the occasion for ceremonial extravagance and for lavish displays of hospitality that enhance the prestige of the host/sponsor.

Patronage and philanthropy thus lead to an eminent reputation. Moreover, they also act as a leveling mechanism to reduce financial disparities between villagers. By investing his money in philanthropic projects, the prosperous individual contributes to the redistribution of wealth in the local economy. The return for his investment comes in the form of public esteem.

Wealth, however, is not the only basis of ijjat. An upright character and high standards of personal conduct also bolster a man's standing in the community. As noted above, the villagers contend that certain individuals are

avored by nature (prakriti) with estimable character traits. Among these inherent virtues are tolerance (sahansilta), courtesy or politeness (vinay, namrata) and honesty (imandar i). Significantly, the virtues cited all pertain to social intercourse. One is tolerant of others, polite to others, honest with others. It is in the sphere of social relations that a person's valued natural traits become manifest.

While some forms of good behavior are thought to stem from a man's intrinsic character, other aspects of his conduct are said to be achieved (apni banai). In either case, good behavior enhances a man's prestige. The Garvpur villagers prize the individual who treats his elders respectfully, greets them with the deferential salutation "Rama-Rama and observes all the proprieties of satkar (see below) in welcoming them to his home. Similarly, a man is commended for encouraging young people and offering them good advice.

There are several interactional contexts in which the qualities of the ijjatdar - the "respected man" - stand out in high relief. One is the pancayat or public council meeting. Whether the pancayat is formal or informal (Retzlaff 1962), a rigid code of conduct prevails at such a convocation. Obstreperous behavior is not tolerated, and the individual who employs abusive language will be ejected from the meeting. On the other hand, that participant wins respect who behaves politely and speaks reasonably, dispassionately and -above all- candidly. Stigma attaches to the man whose duplicity in council is discovered (Lapoint 1977).

The code of conduct for pancayats assures the orderliness of these public meetings. The respectful behavior demanded of participants forestalls open dissension.

Family relations comprise another area in which respectful conduct is enjoined. We shall have something to say below concerning the role of women in the family economy of respect. Here our attention will focus on the norms of male behavior.

Latent in the relationship of family males is tension stemming from various sources. One potent cause of friction lies in the men's disparate interests in the patrilineal estate. Thus, father and son may come into conflict over such issues as the management of family land.

However, an overt rift between a man and his son is rendered less probable by the formality and restraint that govern their relationship (Gupta 1979:75; Kakar 1979:37; Mandelbaum 1970:60). Moreover, the norms of filial respect and mutual courtesy serve to mute any discord between the two men. They may even defuse tensions that would otherwise mar the relationship.

As Mandelbaum (1970:58-59) and others have indicated, these norms demand that a son defer to his father and strive always to obey his parent's wishes. In Garvpur filial respect finds many expressions. For instance, a son ordinarily will refrain from smoking the hukkah (hukka) in his father's presence. Yet will dutifully fill his parent's hukkah with tobacco and fresh water and bring it to him. He stands ready to run his father's errands or serve family guests at parental command. A son can also be expected to defer to his father's judgment in such important matters as choosing a career.

It is clear, however, that the father has equally important obligations to his son. Mandelbaum (1970:59) refers to these when he states that "parents also owe a certain respect to their children; they should not behave in ways that make it difficult for their children to respect them." Yet parental obligation extends beyond this. A father should not only present a model of good behavior; he should also act positively to advise and encourage his sons, provide for their education and advance the chances of their finding suitable employment. When such paternal solicitude gains a father the personal regard of his sons as well as the outward signs of their filial obedience, then he can look for them to stand with him in presenting a united front to the community at large. In Garvpur the household that has achieved this goal of family solidarity wins general approbation. Father and son alike enjoy the respect of their fellow villagers.

The norms governing the father-son dyad illustrate clearly the reciprocal nature of respect. As one Garvpur Brahman put it, "ijjat" is a two-way process. You respect someone and in turn he'll respect you." A village farmer expressed the same idea when he stated that "it is a tradition for younger persons to respect elders and for elders to look after the younger ones." Thus, it is easier for the solicitous father to claim the respect of his son. Analogously, the man who behaves honorably in a pancayat meeting is himself treated respectfully, and, incidentally, his opinion is likely to carry more weight. When a man acquires a reputation for admirable conduct in domestic and public settings, he becomes known as an ijjatdar. His respectful demeanor and upright behavior are reciprocated

with the overt manifestations of popular esteem. It is this reciprocal character of ijjat that allows one to speak of an "economy" of respect.

SHOWING RESPECT (SATKAR)

Because ijjat entails reciprocity, it follows that a man may gain respect from others by exhibiting respect to others. Certain forms of symbolic action convey respect. These conventional modes of behavior are known collectively as satkar. satkar is embodied in courteous speech and polite, deferential conduct. It embraces all palpable expressions of respect.

Perhaps nowhere is satkar better exemplified than in the conventions relating to domestic hospitality. An elaborate etiquette governs the reception of a guest in a Garvpur home. A visitor from outside the village will be seated according to his status. For example, a senior kinsman or other prominent person is ushered to a place of honor in a special chair or at the head of a charpoy (carpai). Next the hosts will offer tea (cay), milk (dudh), or - at the very least - water (pani). Routine activities are suspended as the men of the household converses with their guest and the women hasten to prepare the mandatory refreshments.

If the visit is prolonged, the hosts must provide the visitor with a full dinner and shelter for the night. The villagers explain that these amenities betoken the respect due a guest. To neglect these courtesies would be a sign of disrespect. No villager could condone such a lapse and no family would allow itself to appear so inhospitable.

Hence, offering cay-pani - literally, "tea or water" - forms a part of the economy of respect in Garvpur. To village residents hospitality represents an idiom for the mutual recognition of social worth, for only those of commensurate - though not necessarily identical - social rank exchange such courtesies. In the intercourse between guest and host the prestige of each is acknowledged. The amenities entailed in an intervillage visit mark the guest's acceptance of his host's social standing just as surely as they symbolize the host's valuation of his guest's position. The protocol of cay-pani is the language of mutual status recognition. It established the relative locus of guest and host in the hierarchy of social relationships.

While any outside guest who is male, adult, and of caste standing equal to or above his host's will merit

special consideration, the precise status relationship between guest and host will further specify the prerogatives of the visitor. As already noted, seating arrangements are a sensitive barometer of relative status. Seating precedence is allotted the guest whose social rank is superordinate to that of his host. Thus, if the visitor belongs to a higher caste, he will be offered a separate chair or charpoy or at least a position at the head of a charpoy. The same will apply if the guest is a senior kinsman or any castefellow who ranks his host in chronological age.

It is evident that respectful behavior - satkar - demands careful attention to several ascriptive factors. These include caste rank, kin seniority and chronological age. Since superordinate status along any of these ascriptive dimensions automatically entitles one to a show of respect, it might be supposed that the reciprocal character of ijjat is comprised in interaction between those of unequal status. Yet such is not the case. While subordinates must defer to their social superiors, it is equally expected of the latter that they will respond with the gentility that befits their station.

As the foregoing remarks indicate, the concept of ijjat comprehends respect for status as well as personal esteem. Thus far in our discussion of satkar ascriptive status factors have been emphasized, but achieved status similarly earns special treatment for the guest. Typically, a householder will offer a seat of honor to any visiting official or police officer, even if the visitor is younger than his host.

Having discussed the hospitality due an outsider, we should mention that guests from within the village are likely to receive a more perfunctory welcome. In this case cay-pani is not obligatory. However, seating arrangements will still reflect the relative status of guest and host. Should a member of the superordinate Brahman caste visit a non-Brahman residence, he can expect to occupy the seat of honor during his stay.

The rules of hospitality illustrate clearly the importance of situational factors in the economy of respect. Though different behaviors are required of host and guest (roles that are, of course, reversible from one occasion to another), the conduct of each signifies an acknowledgment of the social standing of the other.

The conventions of satkar play a major role in Garvpur's economy of respect. The householder who acquires

a reputation for his courtesy and hospitality finds that, in showing respect to others, he has won it for himself.

WOMEN AND RESPECT

Thus far we have been concerned primarily with the behavior of men and the effect of ijjat on male relationships. Yet women, too, figure importantly in the economy of respect. The obligations of a woman as family hostess have already been mentioned. She must prepare the refreshments that are served to any guest.

Just as she is obliged to show respect for the household visitor, so a woman must also observe proper decorum, in her domestic relationships. Thus, she is supposed to defer to the senior male members of her husband's family (i.e., those who are genealogically senior to her husband). Deference to them is the reason cited for the practice of purdah (parda) or veiling. 2 In Garvpur this custom prevails throughout the community; it is particularly stressed among upper caste families. In such households a woman veils her face and refrains from initiating conversation when in the presence of her male affines. These signs of deference are mandatory. They represent a way for the woman to show respect for her husband's kinsmen, and - it is worth noting - she must comply with these forms irrespective of her personal feelings for the individuals involved.

Men on their part should respect the feminine modesty implied in the practice of purdah. Before entering the quarters occupied by the family women, Garvpur men emit a warning cough and otherwise make their presence known (cf. Mandelbaum 1970:86). This gives the women time to cover their faces.

A young woman should defer as well to the senior females of her husband's household, but she need not veil herself before them. The docility of the young wife may serve to mollify the older women and ease the strain of living at close quarters in a joint family.

Clearly then, Garvpur women are expected to behave in a respectful manner when they deal with other people. In this sense the canons of ijjat apply rigidly to female conduct. Yet village opinion is divided on the question of whether a woman can earn respect in her own right. Some claim that any prestige she may enjoy derives entirely from the ijjat of her husband. Others insist that a woman can earn respect herself as the result of her own exemplary conduct. It is

certainly true that villagers speak highly of those women who distinguish themselves through their modesty, cooperativeness or generosity to others. Similarly, women who eschew malicious gossip are complimented for their prudence. It seems evident, therefore, that women as well as men can acquire a good personal reputation in the community.

CONCLUSION

As a concept, ijjat spans a wide range of meanings. It comprehends both status respect and personal esteem, and it rests on such diverse foundations as wealth, patronage, and other ascriptive factors of cast, kinship, age and sex.

Above all, ijjat depends on a code of behavior that symbolizes respect for others. Villagers know this code as satkar, the language of respect. Satkar is exemplified in the candor and magnanimity of the ijjatdar. Yet it finds perhaps its definitive expression in the conventions of rural hospitality.

Respect enters into every phase of village life. As we have seen, deference plays a crucial role both in domestic relationships and in public affairs. Daily life affords many opportunities for the exchange of traditional courtesies that betoken respect.

These customary exchanges - here labeled the economy of respect - are of great importance in a village community. They underscore the value rural Indians place on honesty, tolerance and politeness. More-over, by furnishing a protocol for congenial, gracious interaction, they serve to minimize friction and reduce tension between lifelong neighbors.

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NOTES

1. Garvapur is a fictitious name for the village in which the senior author conducted fieldwork in 1969-1970 and 1979-1980. He was joined by the junior author in 1979-1980.
2. Information on purdah was furnished by Deboprah Nelson Lapoint. Her help is gratefully acknowledged.