

What's in a Relational Name?

We were at the Children's museum when my daughter exclaimed in surprise, "Mom- did you see? That girl called her mom by name! That's not okay, is it?"

"Well-" I replied, "some people do call their parents by name, but we don't. It's not considered respectful where I come from. In fact, in India, we don't call anyone who's elder to us by name, as you saw when you were there." I was referring to many of our relations that my daughter met when we were visiting my home town of New Delhi.

All the Mausis and Mausas(Mother's sisters and their husbands,) Maamas and Maamis (Mother's brothers and their wives,) Buas and Phoopas (Father's sisters and husbands,) and many more relations that were given special relational names.

The relational names are in fact even applied to people you are not directly related to. For instance, all friends' parents are Uncles and Aunties and all of their Maamas and Chachas become your Maamas and Chachas. And any stranger on the street becomes either an Uncle or Auntie based on approximate age or a Bhaiya if he is an older boy than you. In fact, the joke used to be that you couldn't marry any young man you knew because you had probably called him a Bhaiya already!

The relational names are so rooted in Indian society that ultimately it's sometimes just the relational name that survives, one's own individual name lost somewhere in transition from youth to adulthood, especially for women after marriage.

I grew up in close proximity to my Chacha's family. When I came to America, I wrote a letter to my Chachi. I put it inside an envelope and sealed it, and then sat in stunned surprise, my pen held at the ready, as I slowly realized that I didn't know her name.

It is of course changing. Women of my generation, educated and for the most part working, all have names that have survived beyond their marriages. My children now call their relations with names first- Meera Mausi, Neeta Mausi, Divya Bhabhi, Renu Mausi, Lata Mausi, Madhu Maami, Ashi didi and so on- identities preserved in the relationships.

For me, to address someone older to me in India by their name is still unthinkable. I remember when I came here to study and there was a man registered in my program; retired, about my father's age. My instinct was to call him: Uncle. But I knew that that would be a huge *faux pas*, since here he was studying right alongside me as a student (another unthinkable thing coming from India,) and everyone was calling him by name. I ended up addressing him with just a smile for the longest time.

Respect. I grew up in a society that deeply ingrained in me the fact that respect comes from age, and from familial relationships. Everyone older was to be respected and to call them by name was rude.

In fact, I even used to wonder about a close friend of mine, from another community, who used to call her mother with the impolite *tu* reserved for ones friends and younger ones, and not the formal *aap*, for you, even though I knew that somehow all the affection in the world was still passed on between mother and daughter in that little word. And when I came here, I used to wonder how people can call their professors by name and sometimes children, their parents by name and still respect them.

But then, I also wondered at the Uncles and Bhaiyas whose hands reach out from within the packed crowds of a Delhi Transportation Bus and grab the girls from behind,

or who molest children while calling them sons and daughters. I wonder at the grown up children who mistreat their parents and the relations who take advantage.

Respect, evidently, is not just in the relational appellations, and yet, as a niece of mine says: “I think you feel more respectful if you call your mom mom, and not her name.” And for me, there’s a world of warmth and respect and connectedness in calling an aunt Chachi or Maami and a grandmother, Naani, that I would never find if I called them by name.

Growing up in the Indian landscape, I cherish all those bonds that come from connecting to another person by a relational name, that link the atoms of individuals to form a molecule of community, of society. What do you think?