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(Based on a longer article by 'Abd-al-Hosayn Zarrinkub)

iii. ETTIQUETTE IN AFGHANISTAN

The conventional rules of polite personal behavior in Afghanistan are known collectively as adāb-e mo'āṣarat (social manners). In Pashto, the apt term nasta wālāra (lit., ‘‘sitting and standing’’) can also be used. A person respected for his or her good manners is referred to as bā adāb or mo'addab, as is the case in Persia.

By disregarding social niceties, a person brings discredit upon himself and thereby diminishes the reputation of both his immediate family and his extended family or group. Conversely, individuals gain respect, maintain status, and enhance their standing in the community through polite behavior. Much of etiquette, therefore, is designed to preserve ēzāt (‘‘honor’’). Consequently, Afghan society places much emphasis on correct behavior.

There is no uniform set of rules prescribing good manners in Afghanistan. No printed work provides a guide. Instead, the elderly females of the household carry the responsibility of teaching etiquette; male elders see to its enforcement. The criteria for appropriate behavior, therefore, vary from group to group and often within each group or even within extended families. In addition, changes have taken place over time. Increased rural/urban migrations since the 1960s have brought about refinements; increasing social equality in urban settings has resulted in simpler codes, particularly among educated elites.

The revolts that initiated the civil war in the late 1970s were in part inflamed by the social insensitivities of the young, urban, western-oriented cadres sent to introduce reform in rural areas after the leftist coup in 1978 (see COMMUNISM). On the other hand, Afghan refugees in Pakistan have adhered diligently to the norms of polite behavior in order to maintain their good name as a group living among strangers, as well as to preserve their own sense of identity while residing in exile.

Despite the lack of uniformity in practices, certain patterns are similar enough to permit some generalizations. The practice of when a person, especially an elder, enters the room is a primary necessity observed by all Afghans. An equally paramount rule requires that greetings be exchanged when meeting either friends or strangers. Al-salām ‘alaykom (Ar., peace be upon you) is most frequently used, to which the reply is wa ‘alaykom al-salām (Ar., and upon you peace). Other forms used in passing include: mānda nabāṣī (Pers., may you not be tired), to which the reply is zendā bāṣī (Pers., may you stay alive); staray mašī (Pashto, may you not be tired), to which one replies kār mašī (Pashto, may you not be poor) or kār owsay (may you be well).

Male friends and colleagues usually embrace one another on meeting and then shake hands, or vice versa. Women kiss each other twice or three times, and they may or may not shake hands. In urban areas women may shake hands with men, but in the rural areas they never shake hands with male strangers. When a woman is introduced to a man, however, she customarily keeps her eyes lowered. It is improper for a woman to establish eye contact while passing males in the street.

Without exception, women are expected to act with decorum and grace at all times. Loud laughter, for instance, is considered most unseemly. A formalized set of questions is mandatory before initiating business. These questions can go on for some time, particularly in rural areas: ‘‘How’s your health?’’; ‘‘How do you feel?’’; ‘‘How is everything?’’; ‘‘How is life?’’; ‘‘Are you fine?’’; ‘‘How is your work?’’; ‘‘How is your family?’’; and so on. Only relatives and very close friends, however, should inquire about wives or other female members of the family.

To show respect, people refer to others by titles rather than by their first names. This applies particularly to elders and superiors. Fathers are addressed as bābā or dādā (Pashto), father’s brothers as kākā, father’s sisters as kakay (Pashto), mother’s brothers as māmā, mother’s sisters as mamay (Pashto), elder brothers as lālā, and grandmothers as mādar-e kālān or mādar-e bozorg in Persian and ana or nā in Pashto. Husbands refer to wives as the mother of their eldest male child. Wives refer to husbands as the father of their eldest child, whether female or male. Children do not refer to elders by their names. Superiors are addressed by their official titles.

The complex and meticulously observed courtesies extended to guests create a sense of exclusiveness and status. Even unexpected guests must be welcomed, no matter how inconvenient their arrival may be. Tea is always offered, and the host must wait for the visitor to bring up the reason for his or her visit. Never should guests be turned away, asked how long they might stay or asked to leave.
A male visitor will never enter a room without knocking or coughing to announce his presence. A distinguished visitor arriving with a group enters first or he may defer to an elder as a gesture of courtesy. Visitors remove their shoes before entering the sitting room for guests. The guest of honor is then invited to sit at the far end of the room (Pers. bâlâ bêtîn, Pashto pârtâ kina), away from the entrance. Others are seated in order of precedence, elders first, with artisans, tradesmen, and those of lesser status generally relegated to places near the door.

This same seating order is followed when guests are entertained at meals. If only family members are present, however, age always takes precedence. When passing by others who are eating, it is polite to wish them a good appetite (Pers. nûs-e jân, Pashto dârâs-e jân); and the passerby will then be asked to share the meal. Afghans serve and eat only with the right hand.

Rules relating to visiting are combined with a maze of individual preferences, but it is incumbent on all children to visit their parents on special occasions. Anyone setting out on a journey should call on friends and relatives to bid farewell; reciprocal visits take place on the traveler’s return.

Proprieties requiring head coverings for men differ widely. Hats or turbans, often worn during prayer, are not obligatory except at condolence services. A man will usually cover his head when visiting his father or attending ceremonial functions. It is obligatory for women to cover their heads while praying or entertaining guests. Many families require females to cover their heads at all times, even inside the home.

Breaches of etiquette include sitting with legs stretched out toward others, abusive language, loud laughter, joking or singing during meals, interrupting others in conversation, disturbing others when praying or working, passing in front of someone who is praying, smoking in the presence of elders or in public transport, and failing to assist kin and neighbors. Strangers are seldom reproached, but elders will severely admonish (Pers. ta’na, Pashto pîgîr) family members for bringing them shame or sullying their respected status within the community.

(Note: much of the above applies in general to traditional and rural Persia as well as Afghanistan. Etr.)


(NANCY H. DUPREE)