

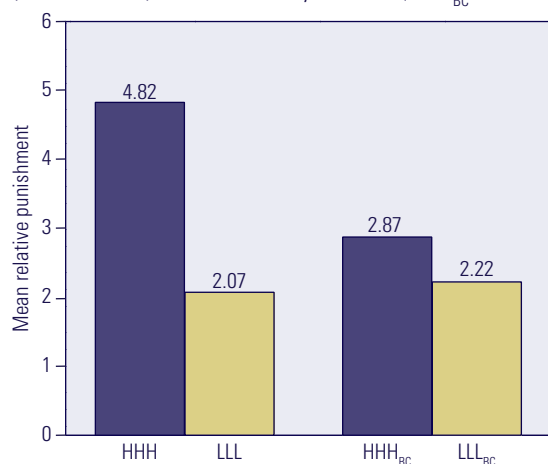
Legacy of the Caste System in the Enforcement of Norms

Denial of basic social and economic rights may diminish the repressed group's ability to organize collective action

Well-functioning groups enforce social norms that restrain opportunism. Social norms are enforced by informal sanctions that are often imposed by those who obey the norm even though sanctioning is costly and yields no material benefits to the punisher.

A recent study by Hoff, Kshetramade, and Fehr examines factors that can influence social capabilities to enforce restraints on opportunism. The study shows how individuals' lifelong position at the top or bottom of an extreme social hierarchy—the Indian caste system—affects their willingness to punish norm violations. The Indian caste system is an excellent setting for studying the effects of social structure on the willingness to altruistically punish norm violations. Individual mobility across caste status groups is virtually absent, while the greater freedoms enjoyed by low-caste individuals in the past 50 years have created much overlap between high- and low-caste groups in wealth, education, and political participation in village government. This means that the study can identify the impact of caste status on individuals' willingness to sanction norm violations.

Figure 1. Relative Punishment When the Victim and Third-Party Punisher Are Members of the Same Specific Caste (HHH and LLL) and When They Are Not (HHH_{BC} and LLL_{BC})



The study conducts an experiment with participants drawn from more than 200 villages in rural north India. In the experiment individuals play a game in their home village with two anonymous players from other villages. The subjects are unobtrusively informed of the caste status of the matched players. Two players (A and B) each have an endowment (50 rupees) roughly equal to the daily wage of an unskilled agricultural worker. Player A has to choose one of two actions: he can “send” his total endowment to B, in which case the experimenter triples its value so that B has 200 rupees altogether; or he can opt out, in which case A keeps his endowment and the game ends. If A sends his endowment to B, then B must make a binary choice: to keep everything for himself or to send 100 rupees back to A.

Player C is an uninvolved outside party who can punish B at a cost to himself. His endowment is 100 rupees. For each 2-rupee coin that player C spends on punishment, player B is docked a 10-rupee note. C has to make a choice for the case in which B keeps all the money and for the case in which B sends money back to A. Player C makes this choice before learning of B's decision. He indicates his choice by moving coins on a game board in private.

The study finds that those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy adopted an attitude toward norm enforcement that was closer to pure self-interest than did those at the top. As figure 1 shows, compared with high-caste subjects, low-caste subjects are considerably less willing to altruistically punish violations of a cooperation norm when the victim is a member of their own specific caste (treatments HHH and LLL). The vertical axis shows the amount spent on punishment when the player defects compared

with the amount spent on punishment when the player cooperates (“mean relative punishment”), measured in units of 2-rupee coins.

In the game results shown in the first two columns, the injured party always belonged to the punisher's specific caste while the norm violator did not. In the results reported in the last two columns, the norm violator always belonged to the punisher's specific caste, while the injured party did not (HHH_{BC} and LLL_{BC}). If the punisher is motivated by in-group favoritism—taking revenge if the injured party is a member of his own specific caste, or giving a norm violator from his own specific caste a break—less punishment should be observed in the second experiment. There is a substantial reduction in the severity of punishment imposed by high-caste individuals but no significant change in that imposed by low-caste individuals. As a result, the caste gap in punishment vanishes. This suggests that in-group favoritism—being more socially minded, but only toward those considered part of one's community—is an important driving force behind the higher castes' stronger willingness to punish norm violations altruistically.

The results suggest that a regime that deprives a group of basic rights may shape the repressed group's culture in ways that moderate members' willingness to altruistically punish violations of cooperation norms, with effects on the group's ability to enforce informal agreements and sustain collective action.

Karla Hoff, Mayuresh Kshetramade, and Ernst Fehr. 2009. “Caste and Punishment: The Legacy of Caste Culture in Norm Enforcement.” Policy Research Working Paper 5040, World Bank, Washington, DC.