



Overcoming Society's Subliminal Notions on Femininity

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KEYWORDS :

Introduction

Reflecting on the shocking rape incident of Nirbhaya in December last year, Shreyasi Singh the New Delhi-based journalist, in her online article, *How it feels to be a Woman in India*, speaks of how she was deeply disturbed by the whole tragedy. But then, she also says that she felt heartened by the subsequent media outrage and announcements of the government-appointed Justice Verma Committee, which came out-- in a bold, non-moralizing and plain speaking way -- with some recommended changes in the existing laws that govern sexual crimes in India, like expediting trials through special tribunals and punishments that befit such heinous crimes. Justice Verma committee also recommended a bill of rights for women.

The recommendations will no doubt have to navigate through labyrinthine delays and debate before we can get it enshrined into law. Once enshrined, it will take a while before laws are translated into tangible improvements in our police stations or district courts, which though professed as the first custodians of justice, often end up being callous accomplices. However as Shreyasi Singh reasons sensitisation of the police is not enough. We need to sensitise people to respect women. Justice Verma can only try to help fix the official narrative surrounding women and crime, justice and rights. The more daunting -- and often the most uncomfortable-- challenge is to alter the mindset of the society and get it to speak up. This means not just raising a fuorewhen a minor is gang raped and her innards torn out, but each and every time a girl or woman is treated unfairly in our homes, colleges and offices.

For many women, who are involved in contributing to the fight by speaking up, a herculean task lies ahead; the task of fighting age-old prejudice, of squarely confronting and challenging the subliminal notions of femininity and masculinity that still underlie the skewed gender ratio and unequal relation that persist into twenty first century India. Only then, we can expect to see a kind of greater empowerment for women. There is a need for shaping the whole discourse around women's issues by examining the religious beliefs, social and cultural beliefs. The question is are we really up to it?

What about Femininity?

In Indian society, masculinity and femininity have traditionally been perceived through distinct archetypes, causing individuals to be categorized as either entirely masculine or entirely feminine. Understanding gender in this manner has led to a uni-dimensional approach as it seeks to measure people based on levels of either masculinity or femininity. The definition of femininity may not necessarily be the same across cultures, but in conventional Indian community, being feminine is often characterized by having homely, polite, and womanly qualities. Femininity, in the Indian culture is about being beautiful, physically delicate, vulnerable, and subservient. It's about appearing docile to seek male approval. Within the domestic sphere, emphasis on femininity is laid, in that they are "reserved, subservient and obey their husbands." Femininity as glorified by the Indian cinema and television, focuses on "home, social relations, and striving towards feelings of togetherness", it emphasizes the traditional stereotypical gender role of the nurturing, motherly home-maker.

In the Hindu scriptures the ancient Indian man is shown as fearless, detached from the affairs of home and rigid. Rama is the prototype of a man whose decisions were to be "quietly accepted by" society, especially women. Also in the *Ramayana* there is the openly declared fear of man towards a "woman of hot temper" (Surpanaka) who is re-

garded as a "dangerous" enemy shows how man regards the ability and knowledge of a manipulative woman consumed by passion. On the other hand, Sita is extolled as a paragon of feminine virtue. Her humility, grace, endurance and self sacrificing qualities are held up as worthy of emulation for the Indian women. But then, in the *Mahabharata* there is the vital protest of fiery Draupadi, who opposed and questioned the subordination of women. She challenges the male hegemony and protests against being objectified and treated as chattel by man. Psychologically speaking, these archetypes perpetuated through popular folklore have got embedded into psyche of the average Indian.

Fighting society's prejudice

We are the world's largest democracy, yet tens of millions of us are treated like second class citizens -- last year, the World Economic Forum ranked India 105th in the world in terms of economic opportunities and education for women. According to India's most recent census, the literacy rate among women is about 65 percent, compared with more than 80 percent for men. Regarding crimes against women, we rank among the top. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) the statistics are horrifying; it states that every 20 minutes, a woman is raped in India. This speaks of a deep rooted malaise originating from what most people say is a subliminal prejudice of the Indian society.

Holistic efforts through changes in school curriculum and constructive administrative policies like gender mainstreaming could gradually help to correct gender prejudice at the micro level of the family unit. Prejudice is not instinctive. It is taught and learned. Children pick it up from family, peers, and the social environment. Its most important source is conformity to home environment. The child picks it up through many verbal and non-verbal messages. Some home environments particularly affect the development of prejudice: quarreling, violence, little or no affection between parents, discrimination of the girl child by parent, suppression, cruelty, over critical, domineering. It is within this way of life that the child goes through the stages of moral development. This is how prejudice begins. Gordon Willard Allport, (93 2005) the famous personality psychologist of America had said, "Prejudice is more than an incident in many lives; it is often locked stitched into the very fabric of personality. To change it, the whole pattern of life would have to be altered." And this means sometimes at the age of five!

About prejudice

The word 'prejudice', means a negative feeling towards a group based on a faulty generalization. Though often discussed from an academic conception and referring mostly to the cognitive component, but when it comes to the real life it involves the affective domain, i.e., the world of attitudes.

A prejudiced person, especially while discussing gender, sees reality in terms of separateness, difference, incompatibility and dissonance. They often come up with statements like men are different from women and the two shall never meet. This attitude can so easily translate into behavior based on prejudice: avoidance, withdrawal, and verbal hostility, individual acts of unfairness, physical attacks, and ultimately, rape. Prejudice is not something we do. It is something we think and feel. The infrastructure of prejudice is not moral depravity, but our regular thinking mechanism that just went wrong.

It starts with the family

While psychologists talk about the prejudiced personality, its develop-

ment is explained almost exclusively in environmental terms. The same environment that welcomes the child into this world supplies the fertile soil for the development of prejudice. The household becomes a part of the new child and he/she becomes a part of it. Within this setting, the concept of gender develops. The child is so much a part of it that the self could not be itself apart from the family. In every society on earth the children are regarded as members of the parents' group as they share the thinking and codes of behavior of the parents. The family's social handicaps are the child's handicaps. Later in life the child's allegiance may shift, but during the early years, a lot of the child's identity is tied up with the family. It is ironic that something as basic as this attachment can provide the right soil for the development of prejudice. But it does.

Children learn to behave largely through observation and imitation of adult models. If models behave in an accepting and respectful way toward others, children are more likely to do so themselves. By seven to nine years of age children can spontaneously verbalize the rule to follow when interacting with 'others.' So they act accordingly even if the rule is not modeled. They look to adult models for information about where, when, and what types of behavior are appropriate. Whichever parent the child sees as powerful will serve as an effective model because the child wants to be like him or her. Only this way will he or she be able to be powerful and respected.

On gender grouping

As children mature, they become aware of categorical differences among the two sexes. Children can discriminate between male and female picture faces as early as five months of age. By the time they are three years old; most children are able to sort photos on the basis of gender, and to use gender labels for themselves and others accurately. This sorting and labeling becomes more accurate during early childhood and may also extend to other ethnic categories later, and to physical attributes such as weight, or mental qualities such as being smart, or religious identity such as "he doesn't love Jesus." This social categorization is part of growing up in society. The differences become real as a natural cognitive schema that gives the world around us some meaning becomes the cognitive dividing board into prejudice. But that is not all.

Social categorization does not stop at dividing the world into contrasting groups. Now the merits of the in-group and out-group are compared, and the child makes the decision to think highly or not, to like or not like.

Gender conditioning at home

Though the home environment is most powerful in the development of prejudice, there is no innate connection between prejudice and the family. The Swiss Development Psychologist Jean Piaget stated that a child's morality was determined due to the uncritical acceptance of the adult model, but he also argued that all morality is not imposed by the group upon the individual or by the adult upon the child. Instead, as the child understands more of how the world works, he is likely to see that rules imposed by parents are flexible and should be changed. Many a time only one of the parents is prejudiced, therefore the child is exposed to two ways of looking at others. Siblings, friends, other family members, neighbors, and day care classmates or teachers may well neutralize the effects of bias at home. It is easier to neutralize a future prejudice before it has developed than to change it in later years when the schemata are fossilized and looking at things 'this way' is almost second nature.

There are two ways for the child to become prejudiced: by directly adopting the attitudes and biases of the home, and indirectly by living in an environment that breeds a prejudiced lifestyle. Once prejudice starts, it is difficult to know when it will stop. Children can easily pick up signals: words, tone and body language. All these are cues eagerly sought and decoded. The way the father treats the mother, the way parents handle their daughter or son, the general trust-distrust climate, the caring-uncaring level of interaction, the democratic vs. dictatorial type of discipline provide the appropriate environment for group prejudice. Thus adherence to the social norm seems to be a guiding principle of what is right. If the child is in an environment where bias and prejudice are the norm, this is what is good. It does not matter that much whether the origin of prejudice lies primarily with the family or with the natural stages of moral development. The

two are very closely intertwined that it is most difficult to separate them for the purpose of analysis.

Factors other than home

According to Piaget, a gender sensitive education at school and experiences with peers encourages children to take the perspective of others. Since they live in a culturally diverse world, they are confronted with opposing viewpoints. This is good. Exposure to peers' different value systems stimulates gender critical thinking. There is also peer popularity, participation in social organizations, and service in leadership roles. All this helps. Social success in pluralistic settings breaks down cognitive barriers. Peer discussion and role-playing of moral issues in the classroom and teacher-led discussions of moral dilemmas tend to facilitate children's passage from a lower to a higher moral stage. Piaget, Kohlberg and others believe that cognitive conflict is the fundamental ingredient of change in moral understanding. This means cognitive disequilibrium, exposing children to conflicting information just ahead of their present moral level. This challenges them to revise their reasoning in the direction of more advanced thinking. On issues related to prejudice, some may do just that. Others, burdened with fossilized attitudes and ways of thinking, will not. They will be the most prejudiced of all. Perhaps the home environment is still too intruding. If the home is not verbal, rational, affectionate, and promoting of a cooperative lifestyle, it would be more difficult to advance to a higher moral stage. Children may not be encouraged to contribute actively to family discussions. And parents may not be more advanced in moral reasoning themselves. They may also not be educated to the level where gender understanding and social change are considered primary values. These are negative forces that retard gender sensitivity and foster prejudice.

Conclusion: Education for social change

Indian culture as reflected by popular media in cinema and television is becoming rather crass; what passes for humor is often gross. As a nation India is becoming too materialistic, and Indians are too engrossed in trivialities in everyday life at the exclusion of serious thought about serious issues. Mainstream cinema makes no attempt to engage intelligently with the women's issue and continues to propagate the age-old cultural ideal of women being unselfish, silently suffering and sacrificing.

It appears people in charge of enforcing the law are not listening to women. The template for policing, and government's thinking about policies towards women in India, remains regressive. But there's been a cultural shift in women's thinking. As more and more women get educated they are becoming more conscious of their rights. Many women now feel entitled to bodily integrity and dignity, and many more women are beginning to understand how that changes the texture of the everyday life.

What today's women are saying is that they want freedom without fear. They are saying: "Don't tell us how to dress, just tell men not to rape us." But the onus seems to be on women, on how they dress, how they behave. Despite all the strident protests made by women rights activists, even today male attitudes appear to remain unchanged. They want a docile woman both at home and the workplace. There is clearly some anxiety all over the world among policymakers about how to re-persuade women to be "real" women - to go back to their traditional docile role even as they become more empowered.

To accelerate the cultural shift and bring about a change in the Indian society, more particularly liberate the male psyche from patriarchal mindset; there is a need for small-scale education campaigns to be taken up, by the government as well as public education systems. The main challenge will be to put the gender sensitive policies into practice in the school management, learning environment and inclusion of topics on the gender concept into the curriculum. Like the efforts being made by education planners to raise environment consciousness from school level, efforts should be made to "raise the consciousness of young Indian men and women" to educate them on the issue of gender. Furthermore, deliberate efforts need to be put in place to move away from paying lip-service to gender issues and begin to act in a gender sensitive way at all levels from the policy makers all the way to the teacher in the classroom.

At the macro level, the government should think of setting up of dedicated gender mainstreaming units to provide technical support as required to various parts of the administration and also to civil society groups as well. Clearly some of the Scandinavian countries like Sweden are in the vanguard on this matter. Following their example, there should be initiatives to introduce policy evaluation and monitoring mechanisms to ensure women security and freedom. Gender impact assessment methods and regular reporting mechanisms; changes in the way that policy is made, all these should be given close attention by the government. Social dialogue should be encouraged by involving the voluntary sector through the institutionalisation of consultation practices, creation or consolidation of advisory bodies representing women's groups and equipping women's representatives with the necessary skills to participate in policy making. Then only we can realize the dream of the father of the nation, the dream of seeing an "Indian woman walk alone in the streets on midnight".

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