

Social Taboos as Barriers to Women Empowerment: An Analytical Study

Abdul Jubbar Assistant Professor Department of English

B.P. Chaliha College, Nagarbera Kamrup, Assam

Abstract

Women's empowerment has been a key point which has fascinated the critics and scholars alike, since the sixties of the last century. Studies like gender discrimination, women writings, women empowerment and female identity have occupied the centre stage of deliberation. Women are often described as better half of men. A society ravaged with inequalities between males and females cannot ensure prosperity for adequate decent living. The question of "how" and "Why" are women in bondage, debated by scholars. This in turn has raised the next question from whom the women need liberation. The real truth is that women are discriminated just because they are "women". Down the centuries women have been subjected to certain social taboos which have been the handiwork of the patriarchally structured social mechanism like India. The very formation of the idea of gender is a social formation whereas sex is a natural division. The society has devised certain mechanism in the form of taboos to deprive the women of her access to the dominant domains of society and therefore put them subservient to men. These questions have great social relevance and needs immediate attention. This paper is an attempt to highlight those issues and factors which impede women's empowerment. Efforts have also been made here to analyze the taboos which have pushed the women to the social periphery and suggestions offered thereof to ameliorate their position for the betterment of the society.

Key words: empowerment, patriarchal, Taboos, peripheral, gender.

Introduction:

Women's empowerment is understood to mean the fight for self-determination and improvements in the legal, social, cultural and political position of women. Subsumed under this term are feminist as well as potential feminist discourses. Not it is only women who are include in the terms "women's empowerment movement" and "feminist movement," but also men who were engaged in the cause of women's empowerment. Thus the term is bored enough to encompass the first indication of feminist demands, many of which originated within the area of male-dominated social, religious or political movements. For countless centuries women in India had been subordinated to men and socially oppressed. The various religions practiced in India as well as the personal laws based on them consigned women to a status inferior to men. The condition of upper-class women was in this respect worse than that of peasant women. Since the later worked actively in the fields alongside men, they enjoyed relatively greater freedom of movement and in some respect a better status in the family than upper-class women. For example, they seldom observed purdah and many of them had the right to remarry. The traditional view often praised the role of women as wives and mothers, but as individuals they were assigned a very low social position. They were supposed to have no personality of their own apart from their ties to their husbands. They could not find any other expression to their inborn talents or desires except as housewives. In fact, they were seen as mere adjuncts to men. For example, while a woman could marry only once among Hindus, a man was permitted to have more than one wife. Among Muslims too this custom of polygamy prevailed. In large parts of the country women had to live behind the purdah. The custom of early marriage prevailed, and even children of eight or nine were married. Widows could not remarry and had to lead an ascetic and restricted life. In many parts of the country, the horrifying custom of sati or self-immolation of widows prevailed. Hindu women had no right to inherit property, nor did they enjoy the right to terminate an undesirable marriage. Muslim women could inherit property, but only half as much as a man could; and in the matter of divorce even theoretically there was no equality between husband and wife. In fact, Muslim women as well as their values were similar. Moreover, in both cases they were economically and socially totally dependent on men. Lastly, the benefit of education was denied to most of them. In addition, women were taught to accept their subjection and even to welcome it as a badge of honour.

Objectives

The problem of women and her position in society is almost as old as human civilization. They have been either oppressed or mal-treated or artificially preserved as beautiful fragile object. Women are oppressed just because they are "Women". They have been denied their right to be individual and develop their innate capacities. This dilemma between their importance and suppression has been debated over a long time. Therefore a humble attempt had been made in this paper to investigate into the sensitive issue of women empowerment and how social taboos, traditions, customs, laws become barrier for the empowerment of women.

Methodology

In this paper basically descriptive and analytical methods have been adopted to investigate the problems.

Sources of the Study: The present study id mainly based on secondary source. To prepare this paper the secondary data are mainly collected from KK Handique Library of Gauhati University and the library of

B.P. Chaliha College, Nagarbera. For collecting the data related to social taboos I have collected some newspaper articles as well as articles published in Journals like- The Heritage, The Dialogue, University News and also collected from Internet.

Data Collection: For collecting data I visited several libraries KK Handique Library of Gauhati University, library of Bikali College, Dhupdhara and B.P. Chaliha College library, Nagarbera. While pursuing an intensive exercise of reading, the relevant parts which would supplement to this paper were clearly marked out. Reference book by outstanding scholars and critics on women

empowerment and social taboos were consulted. Discussions and deliberations were made with the several renowned scholars who had specialization in this field. Above all the analysis of the data both from the primary and secondary sources found to be compatibles and mutually supporting one another towards the final outcome of this paper.

What is Social Taboos?

Social taboo is a practice, habit, object or any material or abstract thing that is not in conformity with accepted practice in that society, and hence discouraged by the members of that society, community, etc. It would depend on various things such as country, language denomination, ethnic differences, or generally how orthodox or unorthodox the majority of those societies are. For instance, in the Asian countries, even in 2008, smoking or taking alcohol in public places is considered taboo. Men's shaking hands with women is considered a taboo by the Islamic countries. Marrying outside one's caste is still considered a taboo in India and in some of the South East Asian countries.

Indian Cultural Taboos – Things we don't do in India:

The Indian Cultural System

Culture encompasses the customs, ideas and social behavior of a particular group of people. From an adjectival point of view, a taboo is termed as restricted or prohibited by social customs. Usually, culture crops from the integration of several ideas, observations, rules and regulations over time from the people to form a cultural system. The Indian cultural system can be viewed as a combination of several cultural systems. This is because; the Indian subcontinent is composed of people of different cultures among them including Andhras Gonds, Gujaratis, Marathas, Oriya among others. From all these groups, certain norms perceived applicable to the larger group are adopted to form the Indian cultural system. It's from this culture where taboos are found. This paper focuses on Indian cultural taboos and further offers remedies.

These are as follows

Avoid display of public affection. Lewd behavior.

Avoid shaking hands with a person of opposite sex. Never wink or whistle.

Do not touch or hit other people's ears.

Do not move objects and books or step on them with your feet. Do not beckon someone with the palm up and wagging one finger.

Avoid using one hand for eating and still use it to serve ourselves from a common dish on the dining table. Avoid use of the left hand.

Disapproving words such as no should be avoided. Do not disagree openly with our elders.

Do not hunt injure or kill animals.

Do not drink any alcohol or smoke in public. Public preaching is prohibited.

Social taboos damage the health of girls and women:

All over the world girls and young women experience their menstrual cycle. It's a process as natural as the ocean flowing, as regular as the full moon. But in many countries the subject is enshrouded with shame and harsh impracticalities. Large numbers of girls in many less economically developed countries drop out of school when they begin menstruating. This includes over 23% of girls in India. As most girls are in secondary education when they begin menstruating, they are restricted in the most important stage of general education. Not only does this have a direct consequence on girl's learning, but in the long-term may be a factor of less educated or high earning women in the family and community.

Shocking sanitary methods: In terms of health and hygiene, the quantities of girls and women who find it difficult to access safe and comfortable methods of blood absorption is shocking. Over 80% of menstruating

girls and women in Bangladesh and 77% in India use an old cloth which is often reused. 88% of women in India sometimes resort to using ashes, newspapers, dried leaves and husk sand to aid

absorption. Girls and women who use unhygienic methods are 70% more likely to contract reproductive tract infections, compared to women who use sanitary towels.

Profound economic effect

Lack of availability of sanitary towels has a profound economic effect on women in India. The largest industry in India is garment factories, where more than 20% of the work force is women. One study found that the majority of these women were using rags from the factory floor as menstrual cloths. Infections are so common in the women who work in the factories that they cause 73% of women miss work unpaid for an average of six days per month.

Chain of social taboos

The problems related to a lack of money and proper infrastructure fails girl's and women's needs in a physical sense. The taboos about menstruation present in many societies impact on girl's and women's emotional state, mentality and lifestyle. Sadly such myths have led to 48% of girls in Iran, 10% in India, and 7% in Afghanistan believing that menstruation is a disease. For example, the removal of bad blood from the body is rather than a natural and healthy part of adolescence or young adulthood. In some parts of India, perceptions of Hinduism centre on notions of purity and pollution. It is believed that if a girl or women touches a cow while she is on her period, that the cow will become infertile - leading girls to associate their own bodies with curse and impurity. In rural Kenya women on their periods are not even considered fit to enter a goats den or walk near livestock, and allowed to eat their meat or drink their milk.

Shame and embarrassment

A water Aid study showed that 89% of women in Nepal abide by form of social restrictions during menstruation. This is because menstruation is seen as a subject of shame and embarrassment. Girl and women are prevented from activities such as preparing food, travelling, and attending school. In rural India, men and women sometimes maintain separate quarters when a woman is on her cycle. For fear that they are vulnerable to witchcraft attacks, some women worry about how to dispose of their pads or old cloths, leading them to not getting washed.

Girls' needs to attend schools

Increasingly, some schools in India have also begun to tackle the issue of their periods. An example is Batajore B.M. High School in the Bangladesh. Cleanliness and proper use and maintenance of the toilets are monitored by the school WASH committee and student brigade. Weekly hygiene lessons have been made compulsory at the school. Additionally the school offers sanitary napkins for sale to the students at a cost much cheaper than the average. The school is one of the thousands in Bangladesh that has built separate toilet facilities for girls over the last few years.

Stubborn social taboos

Many organizations and initiatives help to reduce the problem through hygiene education, cheaper sanitary towels, and female public toilets. However, perhaps the stubborn social myths around menstruation, and cause so much distress to girls and women, are much tougher to get rid of. Through our community outreach programmes, we should support women to have fulfilled and empowered lives.

Analysis

The general social antagonism which has taken hold of our entire public life today, brought about through the force of opposing and contradictory interests, will crumble to pieces when the reorganization of our social life, based upon the principles of economic justice, shall have become a reality. Peace or harmony between the sexes and individuals does not necessarily depend on a superficial equalization of human beings; nor does it call for the elimination of individual traits and peculiarities. The problem that confronts us today, and which the nearest future is to solve, is how to be one's self and yet in oneness with others, to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain one's own characteristic qualities. This seems to me to be the basis upon which the mass and the individual, the true democrat and the true individuality, man and

woman, can meet without antagonism and opposition. The motto should not be: Forgive one another, rather, understand one another.

Nevertheless, the position of the working girl is far more natural and human than that of her seemingly more fortunate sister in the more cultured professional walks of life teachers, physicians, lawyers, engineers, etc., who have to make a dignified, proper appearance, while the inner life is growing empty and dead.

The narrowness of the existing conception of woman's independence and empowerment; the dread of love for a man who is not her social equal; the fear that love will rob her of her freedom and independence; the horror that love or the joy of motherhood will only hinder her in the full exercise of her profession all these together make of the empowered modern woman a compulsory vestal, before whom life, with its great clarifying sorrows and its deep, entrancing joys, rolls on without touching or gripping her soul.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Liberty is the first condition of healthy growth in society and women need it as much as men. In India we do not want to admit or grant the equality of women with men. Women are eternally inferior. "God is the law; thou mine" that ought to be- according to most of the Indians - the attitude of the Indian wife to her husband. Such being the case, empowerment has to be a cautious and gradual process. Nothing delights the conservative Indian more than the sight of a empowered woman stumbling. So, in India we have to contend against this psychology as well. Liberation of women cannot come in a day. It is also true that we cannot do away with purdah, unless we remove the inferiority complex of Indian women. It means that they are to be given equal moral, social and legal status with men. There are certain legal disabilities regarding proprietary rights and administration, and these must be removed. Unless a woman enjoys full legal rights, she cannot feel confident of her place in society and will have to look up to man. The institution of marriage as it obtains in India will have to be radically changed. We have a Widow Remarriage Act; we have also the Sharda Act prohibiting child-marriage. But these acts do not operate successfully in India, because the mass of people do not care for these reforms. Young men with liberal views should do their best to see that widows can be easily and safely remarried.

Unless that is done the young India widow would never be empowered women. As for child marriage public opinion must be organized against it. In a word, the old scriptures and superstitions should not be allowed to control the lives of the people to the extent they were doing. Marriage to the woman should be a choice, not a compulsory religious duty. No girl should be married against her wishes as is daily done in thousands of Indian homes. The women must, then be educated and their legal disabilities removed, the institution of marriage reformed and everything should be done to bring about their economic independence. There are many educated women in India today who are earning their own living. This is a move in the right direction. Without some sort of economic independence, the empowerment of Indian women would be rather unreal. Only when the husband knows that the wife need not depend entirely upon him for her daily bread, he will think twice before doing anything against her wishes.

In India we live in a transitional age, the transition being from a feudal, agricultural society to a modern, industrial society. We are neither totally backward nor totally modern, but somewhere in between. We have to get over transitional period and become a modern, industrial state. We must press scientific thinking on a massive scale and encourage people to give up superstition and backward, feudal ideas, for example, casteism and communalism. This is only possible by means of a complete revolution in our hundreds of millions of people which will sweep away all remnants of the disgusting feudal and medieval practices and mentality, particularly with respect to women.

Empowerment does not mean that the women should smoke or drink or dance in ball-rooms, nor does it mean that they should substitute their Indian modesty by Western freedom of thought and action. It only means that they should be given the fullest liberty to realize themselves according to the genius of their race.

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