

## Emancipation of Women under the Cultural Matrix

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### Introduction

Aristotle said that man is a social animal. In succession to that and furtherance to his theoretical construct Thomas Hobbes while defining elements of human nature has claimed men as a cruel and selfish being. It is argued that man is naturally inherited with such tendencies which an ordered society will denounce as unethical and negative. At times, various scholars cross-cutting through various disciplines has tried to explain the same in myriad ways. The nature of men has motivated him to have control over other elements of the nature. From domestication of animals to the usage of flora and fauna according to his terms is an undoubted history of its progress. This tendency of men to have established its control when extended further has led to exploitation. Men insistence towards nature's exploitation was criticized by Jean Jack Rousseau in his treatises. But human civilization encountered a setback only when the same was extended to establish a gendered society. It has resulted in subjection of women to subordination and discrimination in various ways.

Men through ages have built structures of dominations through multiple institutions of the society. Constant efforts were laid later only to institutionalize them in lives of the people throughout the world. They were engrossed within the spectrum of culture. Histories were all the efforts of dominate gender (i.e. the men) to infuse adaptations of those institutions within the specific context of culture. Institutions were made cultural specific. This has resulted in two connotations. First is that the societal institutions were erected with an inherited intention to subordinate women. In the path of development whatever institutions evolved were all diluted with the intention of subordination of one gender to the other. The claims of natural evolutions of intuitions proved fallacious as they all inhibit the elements of discrimination, subordination and often ostracisation of one specific gender, the women. From this flows the second connotation that human institutions were not objectively instituted rather they are fabrications for specific intentions of domination by one gender over the other.

Human being is a social animal who cannot exist without a society. Here society does not exist as a universal phenomenon rather it is depended upon geographical conditions, past histories, human experiences in its distinct ways of development. Hence, no society is identical to the other. But they do reflect common principles of behaviour and patterns of cohabitation. Laws governing human behaviour were universal, transcending the boundaries of societies, exist in wherever and whatever ways. For adaptation of institutions in various societal existences require dynamism of institutions itself. Hence, various institutions were created in-accordance to the societies where they have to exist. Institutions were universally instituted but with dynamism to the society. For example, legal instruments for protection of women rights through laws were different in western societies as compare to their Asian counterparts. Women in western societies fought for abortion rights decades' back but in Asian societies, like the one of India where they still seek to evolve laws for protection of women against sexual harassment and assault. Societies vary, so their cultures. Culture remains the predominant driving factor

for the growth of societies. In fact, culture represents the real structure of the society. This is why men have adapted institutions in various cultural contexts. But numbers of cultural institutions are there that adhere the norms of gendered discriminations in their own ways.

### **Family**

Family as a cultural institution has been evolved by the men in a hierarchical pattern. With societal differences whatsoever, family predominated with the element of gender bias. Here men structured the institution so that his stature remains superior and intact of any dynamism. Structure of family itself connotes the dominance of men over women. This is further socialized through regular patterns of day to day behaviour. Family is the institution where men has dominated and discriminated women in personal matters also. Women were subjected to frequent domestic violence though nature and intensity differs. From mental harassment to the verbal and physical abuse are all the elements of men unethical practices to dominate and discriminate women at the worst. Family in this way is an instrument in the hands of men to legalize all unethical practices to subordinate women. It is the hierarchical nature of family as an institution established that makes it unethical in itself.

Interestingly, family as an institution is established in such a way that the patterns of hierarchy never circulate to give chances for women to have play a decisive role. For example, men status as bread-winner for family remains intact even when men don't work and the entire family depends upon the labour of women. In this way women even if succeed to reach the position of the men ever, they won't be accepted by the institutions of dominations.

### **Religious Customs**

Religious customs were designed in a manner to suffice the same goal of hierarchy. From western civilizations which are homogeneously Christian to the heterogeneity of Afro-Asian civilization having numerable religious customs were all the stories of women subordination. With exceptions of few, religions and their customs have ostracized women. They are subjected to second class citizen in all matters of customary practices including the right to get salvation. For example, the Old Testaments of Bible waved various rights of women in a numerable instance during her menstruation periods. Similar is with majority of religions that ostracized menstruating women to even entering the premises of religious institutions. Here the exclusion of women is not complete, as they are at times were included in many of the religious practices but only as a second class citizen. Hinduism has established its religious practices where women were equated to men. But the foundation of Hindu legal order based on *Manu's Dharma* itself has not only segregated women rather discriminated them in various ways. Major text of *Garuda Purana* provides for ostracization of women from attending ceremonial rituals at the death of an individual. They are debarred from getting salvation which is sole right of the men. Buddhism also has such elements of discrimination. In one religious text, Lord Buddha communicates his discipline Anand with certain reservations of gender bias. He said that the Sanghas which are the institutions for preaching teaching and learning will end in a short span of hundred years and will not survive the next thousands of them, if women were permitted to enter in them. Women entrance in the religious institutions was doubted by the religious authorities themselves. Though different versions of interpretation were given to defend and counteract the argument but ail no convincing argument. Of the many predominant religions, customary practices in Islam were also not insulated with gendered discrimination. Separate religious institutions for profess of the religious customs is a part and parcel of the religion. Though it could have an element of equality with separation rather than segregation but at times the religious ordinances of the

religious leaders or Imams proves the same. The religious leader who defines the teaching of Shariat deconstructs it in such a way that it ultimately results in a gender bias. Predominantly Islamic country the Saudi Arabia is a classic example where a country has vetoed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in the United Nations (UN) over the reservations of providing consensual rights to marriage equally for men and women. The critical stand later gave birth to an entire discourse of Relativists or the Cultural Relativism. It is a discourse to establish all discriminatory practices under the umbrella of culture to truth and acceptable.

### **Other Institutions**

In addition to above, men has built numerable institutions like festivals, traditions and certain abstract norms of behaviour which are clubbed under values, both ethical and unethical to establish a specific pattern of hierarchy and discrimination. And to have a gendered control even in the private affairs, the institution of marriage and divorce were deformed accordingly. So, the institutions which were engrossed under the broader framework of society and its specific contour culture were primarily the structures of dominations for gendered discriminations. Those structures were so intact and concrete enough to withstand any challenges whatsoever. We have an erudite ideological stands of feminist waves. Epistemologically accepted three variants of feminism viz. Liberal, Socio-Marxist and Radical feminism were all entirely different in their arguments to counter the gendered discriminations. They have all their separate discourse under which they establish their arguments and seek to alter the misgivings. Their role in transforming society stands critical as they succeeded in certain societies and failed to have any impact in the others. Separate reasons are responsible for that. It is worthwhile to mention the roles of nations and international system to change this paradigm of gendered discrimination. United Nations under the World Conferences have taken the issue for wider publicity to collaborate joint efforts of world civilizations in ending discriminations against women. With the advent of International Year of Women declared in 1975, UN has conducted its First World Conference on Women in Mexico City (1975). With a positive note, UN asked the international community to have joint efforts in ending discriminations against women and for fostering measures to institutionalize efforts for the cause of women in different ways. On the same account UN in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995) has called nations of the world government for initiating positive actions. And at the interval of every five years UN has started taking stock of those efforts.

On the same parallels the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) under its third goal 'gender equity and women empowerment' has taken firm stand to resolve the issues of women. In Indian context, it has launched 'a billion rising' campaign in form of a movement to spread awareness and sensitize people over the issues of women. Various national and international legal instruments were also enacted for the same purpose. Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against the Women or the CEDAW is one of those important legislations which got worldwide acceptability and endorsement. The impact of these instruments cannot be underestimated. They do have transformed the societies. But their impact is limited and has certain boundaries which it fails to overcome. Those at times are implicitly or explicitly results of resistance created by the structures of dominations which it fails to transcend.

The structures of dominations at times, if encounters any threat to its existence is escaped through another set of structure which black feminists termed as 'matrix of dominations'. In the structure of dominations there were institutions which leads to discriminations imposed directly on the women. But in matrix of dominations these institutions are interwoven and overlapped in such a manner that one can

escape to overcome the one but not the others which are imbedded in its own framework. Universally women were subjected to these two sets of structures in general and Indian women in particular. Indian women have encountered both the institutions of society and culture in myriad ways. They left behind in the realm of development and failed to even protect themselves out of male subordination, subjugation and discriminations. Various reasons are there for it. First is that the societal institutions were unnatural and lacked objectivity in their growth. Even after the discovery of that, movements in India never raised to challenge them. They remain insulated to the development of women in other spheres of the world. The dichotomy is explained from the fact that when women throughout world were fighting for their rights, Indian women remained isolated. They never raised their voices even when there was a cause for their upliftment. Negligible response of women against the Hindu Code Bill is a classic example. And the reason behind such attitude goes in their socialization, so intense that they hardly protest against the established institutions.

Here primary base of argument rests on failure of women to acknowledge themselves according to the need of time and space. They were under the structures of domination so deep that they fail to consider their own welfare. Even when instruments of legal laws were enacted, voices for their implementations through social movements and transformation of society were never heard of. They remained within the walls of the court room. A social revolution, in other words failed in Indian context. It is argued that feminism failed to dent the Afro-Asian societies including India. Feminist movement in India was never evident to transform the societal evils against women. A movement was always required not to contain the institutions established (may be by men) but to implement them in spirit and substance. A movement peaceful but adhering the feminist perspective in itself. Hence, the plight of women in India is to an extent is also due to the limited and negligible impact of feminism.

Second, is that the cultural institutions like family is so deeply entrenched in the social fabric that women in general cannot even dream to break it out. Even after knowing the drawbacks of the institution, they hardly tend to restructure or reformulate them. And, in case if women dare to take initiatives they were suppressed by other institutions. If women have to think of her emancipation, they have to break the cultural set-up of men as they preach the gendered discriminations. Scholars of Cultural Studies usually pretend and argue for a middle path of cohabitation. But that too is the dictates of men and not the women. Here the argument is not to destruct the family as an institution rather the set-up of family which is governed in accordance to the whims and fancies of men. A dire need is to challenge the cultural set-ups of men and reformulate them in consideration with equality of genders.

Women are socialized in the framework set-up so deep that they cannot even think of breaking the structure. Adaptations under gendered set-up of culture and tradition have subjected women on the mercies of men. Here it is worth mentioning that the Cultural Relativists or Relativists claim the superiority of their culture and its distinctness. They argue with fanciful words like 'Asian Values' or in Indian context the 'Indian Values' which are not only distinct to the western values rather superior to them. They contain the universalization of morals and ethics. There is no doubt that differences are there in cultures of various civilization. But that doesn't permit one to justify discrimination and subjugation of one class of people by the other. Justice transcends the boundaries of culture and traditions and left no room for injustice on whatever grounds. Indian women fail to recognize that objectivity and fallen prey to the gendered societal construct.

## The Media

When it comes to media in the picture its role becomes very crucial. It is contended that media plays a dual role in the context of women. The first is reflective and second is the reformative of popular culture and trends in the society. Employing to its very first role, media generally reflects the trends of the society without any distortion. It works like a mirror providing the true image of the society. In doing so, it not only supports the prevalent norms of behaviour but also establishes legitimacy and sanctity to what exists previously. It is for what media is called the voices of people. In doing so, media just holds the image of maintaining status quo for the women vis-à-vis society.

Contrarily, media through its own course of action supported by research and development employ to cater the needs for change. Aspiring to mold the society through diversion of public opinion and belief, media use to transform the ideas in different ways. It could be both positive and negative depending upon its subject concern. And when it comes to women, media has contributed in both the ways. If we delve in details, we find more negative than positive contributions of media for the emancipation of women. It has given impetus to what is described as the matrix of domination.

It is media through which various institutions were socialized in the manner that they seem to be true in themselves. And when it comes to women, the role becomes very critical. It has attached various strings to women. The strings connotes to the 'image construction' of women done by media in negative ways. The image constructed leads to public opinion and henceforth the culture in practice. What media did is that it has carved women in a vulnerable, tender and an image of women in-obedience to men. It has legitimized the men domination with women insubordination. And in a long run it has establish as a practice of convention. So, whosoever dares to break the same or act in arbitrary is subjected to suppression and criticism. This has paved way for what men do in present times, the violence on women. The harmful and discriminatory practice preached via media leads to miseries for women. It has further created stereotypes and prejudices against them. Worst of all is done by the Advertisement industry which not only has objectified women rather commodified her body for the purpose of commerce and trade.

Nonetheless, the Hindi Cinema or what popularly called Bollywood industry has overburdened women with loads of obedience that they had to suffice irrespective of any adversarial circumstances whether prejudicial to their mental and physical existence or not. They were portrayed as shopaholics who only aspire to have hefty wardrobes. Parameters of beauty are attached with immense use of cosmetics and commodities. This has resulted in burden among them to prove themselves in-accordance to the dictates of media. A blind race has started among the women to prove them for the culture propagated by the media. Media does have contributed in positive manner also. It has now transcended the previous approach to now heading towards positive change for the women. From movies to daily soaps, many of them are now designed with women centric issues. What was done for decades is now well thought to be undone. And that could be attained only when the real and neutral projection of women at par with men is inculcated in the minds of people through media culture. It has to go a very long road in a very short span of time. Evaluating the present scenario we can hope to have positive results.

## Conclusion

The emancipation of women is a crucial task. It is to overcome the misgivings of men for centuries over women and that too in a short span of time. Men has made structures of dominations through various institutions and worked to institutionalized them in the prevalent culture. For making those efficacious for decades to come and sustain any challenge the institutions were imbibed with dynamism of time and

space. Institutions were culture specific and are not objectively crafted. From family to religion and various traditional practices were all having a deep rooted psycho-emotional bondage. Institutionalized women can't even dare to think of breaking these institutions. Interestingly, there are success stories of women breaking that stereotypical cultural bondage having negative impact on their growth. Feminism has empowered them to dare that. But when it comes to India, feminism has negligible impact to transform the plight of women. It has failed to even revolutionise the idea of emancipation. This goes to another set of argument, the matrix of domination. Structures of subordination can be thought of overcome by the women in longer run but trapped under a matrix of domination is not an easy task to break off.

In between of these cultural institutions is the critical role of media. Media has not only legitimized the suppression of women but has also established a culture of practice that gives sanction to it. It has established a stereotypical prejudicial environment for women which cannot be easily withered away from the mindsets of people. Though now radical transformations are going on. Media on a positive not has started undoing the wrong done by it previously. But it will take another decade or so. So chances are bleak and prospects are minimal. In between those hiccups we hope to have positive results in the nearby future.

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