

The social construction of ‘self’ and Womanhood in a Hindu village of Bangladesh

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Abstract:

In order to understand the empowerment situation of the women exhibiting a rigid social setting cushioned by religious impositions, it is important to envisage how women as subjects construct and reconstruct their own realities negotiating the prevailing social conditions that map their individual as well as collective lives. The present paper intends to portray the crude reality of the inner lives of the Hindu women of a Bangladeshi village who are vulnerable for being ‘women’ on the one hand and the ‘minority’ population on the other. It hence shows how these women construct their self image in relation to their womanhood and how they significantly differ according to their distinctive social bases. Finally, the paper highlights the recent changes that are continuously shaping and reshaping the Hindu women’s notion of self identity coping with the newly emerging social needs.

Conjuring up the image of a traditional Hindu woman of rural South Asia creates in mind the portrait of a lady draped in colorful, red sari with a dot of vermilion as a cosmetic mark on the forehead and the red vermilion powder in the parting of her hair indicating her sign of marriage and ‘fortune’. However, to reveal the actual image of womanhood that nestles the Hindu minds, it appears to be vivid that the meaning of ‘self’ construed by the women’s world be crucially apprehended. As self constitutes the existential locus of a person, to focus on selves is then to direct observation on the experiencing, self-aware human beings. Self-hood entails reflexive awareness, the recognition of oneself as an ‘object in a world of objects’ (Harris 1989).

Epistemologically noted, self relates to personhood in an indirect but opaque way. As Harris points out, personhood entails agency. To be a person means being publicly considered an agent, i.e. somebody who authors his or her actions. And personhood, regarded from that standpoint is a dynamic concept: having a temporal dimension and a situational context (Kotalova 1996).

In terms of agentive capacities, where self develops in an interaction with others and is continuously refracted by external factors, the patriarchal societies reveal a significant canvass of image. Accordingly, women's capabilities are found to be critically bound to their reproductive capability and their adjustment to the affinal group, i.e. the management of self. In the Hindu rural societies, like that of the Muslim society, henceforth due to the lack of alternative moral career for a woman beyond wifhood and motherhood, the range of these capacities is narrower for women than for men and, because rooted in biology, also liable to circumstances which are beyond the total control of the authors (wives not husbands are accountable for a couple's reproductive failure)(Kotalova 1996).

Nancy Chodorow argues logically how self develops in a relational manner in such societies. Considering that self is inextricable from interpersonal relationships, since human personal identity is essentially relational, a personal identification with one's own gender is an essential characteristic of personal identity. According to her, men and women essentially define themselves in relation to different social standards learned in childhood. And this, whether originally innate or socialized in early infancy, are so much a part of the identities of men and women that they cannot be changed.

In a crude Hindu society like Khankhanapur, following Chodorow, the essence of 'self' develops in the women's heart as they continuously encounter diverse factors that are external

but related to them. Religion, society and their early childhood socialization process significantly catalyzes their perception of self. From the childhood, a village Hindu girl is expected to perceive herself as a little woman incorporating into her character the womanly traits. She is socialized not to behave like a boy, go here and there and escape household duties. Alongside her school education, as a 'little woman', she is expected to spend her time in learning the house works from her mother. This is thought to set a stage for her to act her role of a wife and mother in her life-long social drama.

As a Hindu girl attains her stage of puberty, restriction is imposed on her physical movements. This sudden constriction of movement indeed creates in her a distinct 'self' which differentiates her from the boys. It is in this period that she is given a clear definition of her future role as a good wife and mother by the family and by society at large. Such a task is hence done by direct verbal communication from the women often associated with them, by exposing her to the characters of ideal women that have been read and talked about for generations, by exposing her to religious and household activities that women are properly engaged in, and by an attempt to restrict her association with the male world.

During her girlhood, a village Hindu woman incorporates within her the very notion of womanhood that resonates around marriage and childbirth. The women's world often gives her messages about how to grow up a woman and to become a good wife and mother. This helps her to perceive as a woman whose self is directed towards marriage – her ultimate goal in life. She has then developed into a young woman. Physically and psychologically, her natural tendencies are to find ways to realize and express herself as a woman. She understands, as a 'self', she is expected by society to stay in the state of 'marriage' screening it for her something to look forward to with mystery and hope.

'Self' is indeed revealed among the Hindu women of Khankhanapur, in their lives after marriage. In their married lives, the Hindu women, irrespective of class and caste intermingle their ideas of 'self' and 'womanhood', since womanhood play a crucial role in constructing their images of 'self'. Most women construct their self-image in relation to the society at large (i.e. in relation to their husbands, fathers, in-laws, brothers, sons etc.) as well as in their relational position in the village social structure.

For the women of *Kundu para* where reside women from several caste backgrounds (i.e. *kundu, dutta, kayastha, ghosh, pal and karmakars*) self is constructed with low esteem. Very often, women of this section of Khankhanapur village find their idea of self evolving on the pivots of 'otherness' and 'belongingness'. No woman can ever think of staying unrelated or unconnected with a protecting male. Self is imagined by them in their position of either as daughters, sisters, wives or mothers. Staying single simply reveals for them the image of abnormality and misfortune.

Similarly, the women of *Shahapara* also constitute their images of 'self' in terms of fulfilling their specific gender roles (i.e. their roles as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters). Like the womenfolk of *kundupara*, they perceive the clear notion of themselves as being efficient in housework, maintaining a satisfactory family environment and giving birth to children preferably sons. Unfulfilling of these womanly roles is regarded by them bringing for them a derogatory 'self-image' as hence they no longer remain a '*lakhkhi*' (a term often used for the women comparing them with the Goddess of riches, fortune and happiness). However, as the true picture reveals, despite having the created image of selves working for the well-being of others, most Hindu women of *Shaha* caste visualize themselves with a weak self-image. As a *Shaha* woman quotes, '*amra nizshaddhin na, amra to poradhin*' (we are not free,

we are subjugated) a vivid self indeed gets portrayed for these women who are inhabiting a male dominated atmosphere.

Religion, embracing within its arena the notion of 'purity' and 'pollution' also marks a symbolic significance in constructing the images of 'self' for the Hindu women of Khankhanapur village. For example, the image of 'self' is posited with a high esteem among the Brahmin women who are ritually pure according to their religious status. They construct their high esteemed self portrait as they consider themselves enriched with in depth ritual knowledge which women from other caste backgrounds do not possess. Moreover, due to their higher caste position in the society they can perform many more rituals to which other caste women so not have access. Women belonging to caste groups other than Brahmins though perform necessary rituals; as mediators they are able to provide the '*bhog*' (ritual supplementary) only marking their relatively lowered ritual status and a narrowed self-image. Religiously, hence the constitution of selfhood resonates on the basis of participating in religious compressions and visiting the temple for ritual observances where factors like being 'pure' and 'impure' matter. *This point is revealed with much clarification, when the low caste women like bagdis and beteis and the untouchables (methars and chamars) ritual position in the society is carefully scrutinized in relation to their participation in the ritual sphere.*

However, among the low caste and untouchable Hindu women who are socially underprivileged, the self-image is found to be quite high. This is not in terms of ritual status but in terms of proud social negotiating power. To illustrate a Bagdi women's respect for 'self' most often their participation in the public sphere i.e. the domain of economically valued work is hence considered to be a crucial locus of analysis. As the *bagdis, beteis, chamars* and the untouchables belong to the lower class, for their life expenses the women need to work

essentially to generate income. For such a purpose, therefore most women belonging to these caste groups spend time outside their 'private' household domain which though is looked down upon by the village society, is considered by them as providing a firm ground for negotiating with their critical life situations. As a bagdi, woman says – '*Amra kaj na korli ke khete-porte debe? Boroloker kase shahajjo chaile to jhaata mare, tar cheye khete khawa onek shommaner. Karo haat patte hoi na.*' (Who will provide us food if we do not work? if we go for assistance to the rich they insult us. Working is respectable as then we need not to beg"), these reveals an image of how a low caste woman like her expresses a keen concern for self-respect.

Similarly, the methar women portray themselves as respected 'selves'. They do not consider their cleaning occupation as 'low'; rather they impose a high value on their active participation in such an income generating work. According to a woman of methar patti – '*Amra kaj kore khai – jara amader nichu bole tarai nichu* (we earn our own living, those who consider us low are low themselves). This in fact, asserts their inherent power of making the image of self which is not docile but is empowering with a power to resist the persisting oppression and stigma imposed on them.

For the women of untouchable castes, 'pollution' does not operate as a crucial matter in constructing the images of self. According to them '*Amra shobai bhogobaner kase shoman – amra keno nichu, opobitro hobo?*' (We are all equal to God why shall we be low and defiled?), which is further added with, '*amra opobitro hole puja korte pari? Amra pobitro. Je shomaj amader opobitro bole shei shomaji onek opobitro*' (if we were defiled how could we perform our rituals? The society which regards us defiled is itself defiled.). Yet they are not unaware of their dealings with defiled items like human excreta and the waste materials which bring for them the stigmatized social image of '*metharni*' or sweeper.

The construction of 'self' thus marks significant variations from caste to caste in Khankhanapur. Where for some upper and relatively upper caste Hindu women, the image of self is showed up with constrictures, for the lower caste including the untouchable women, selfhood is entailed with comparative flexibility. Hence, personhood also resonates on these ideas of 'self' for the distinct sets of Hindu women inhabiting the different sections of the village. A possible reason for such a differentiation is the imposition of rigid caste rules and social values on the upper caste women and the loopholes of these values in case of the lower caste Hindu women. Another reason is the class structure within which these women are situated positionally, experiencing distinctive social and economic conditions.

Since socialization process as earlier noted is a crucial factor in influencing the self perception of the women of different caste groups, the construction of self significantly varies in relation to the social training, one gets in her own social and caste boundary. For example, the relatively upper caste women who are both socially as well as economically privileged, socialization process starts with housework, school education and valued sentiments. For them, 'self' is constructed on the basis of the middle-class sentimental values evolving around marriage, being good wife, well in law and a good mother. As they are grown up in the terrain of restrictions and male subjugation, 'Dependency' is the sole edifice on which rests their perception of self. On the contrary, while the women from lower castes and untouchable groups are socially trained from their very childhood to work for economic gain, their self perception is not surprisingly found to be different. Often not enmeshing their 'selves' with their collective or family life, they are found presenting themselves as 'individual selves' who can decide and pursue their own interests quite independently. Where 'divorce' is unimaginable to most Hindu women in a village social setup like Khankhanapur, among the methar/sweeper women divorce

is therefore considered to be a justified initiative if marriage fails to work or husband becomes oppressive. For instance, a methar/sweeper woman named Sunity Jamaddar whose husband often abuses her physically regard it to be a good decision to ‘divorce’ her husband. As she says, ‘*Ami kaj kori, nizer shongshar nize chalai. Keno ami bhat deina, kapor deina emon moroder ghor korbo? Orokom shami thakar cheye na thaka bhalo*’ (I work by myself and maintain my own family. Why shall I live with a man who does not provide me food and clothing? It is better not to have a husband like this). Her confident self image is clearly asserted which displays a strong sense of personality and self worth.

The notion of ‘power’ or ‘shakti’ is considered to be incorporated in the conception of the Hindu women in terms of basic ritual power. The women say, it is the inherent ritual power through which they can ask for their well-being from the Gods and Goddesses. According to them, where men can only perform the major rituals related to their economic livelihood, it is the women folk who are enabled with the special power of being ‘*lakshmi*’ (the Goddess of fortune, riches) and ‘*dharitri*’ (the symbolic power image of fertility) and are capable of observing the daily rituals and *bratas* for keeping their family safe and smooth. Although, from this standpoint, the untouchable *methar* and *chamar* women relate their ‘self’ with their inner sacredness through which they can communicate the Gods and Goddesses, for them too ‘shakti’ refers to something divine which provide them with ‘a power from inside’ – their ‘*atta –a-r shakti*’.

Yet invariably the Hindu women of Khankhanapur construct their image of ‘self’ as something subjugated by strong patriarchal values. According to them, they are in a ‘liminal position’ belonging neither to their father’s family nor fully to their husband’s family. Being

mediators of the male world, they hence lack freedom and space for choice even in major decisions of life – like marriage and child conception. Although as individual selves they sometimes feel from inside the power to resist the autocratic male domination, the way they are socially constructed is so ingrained in their social fabric that they can hardly consider themselves as independent selves. According to their perception, it is because of their rules of ‘dharma’ and ‘karma’ coded by the religious texts, which place ‘women’ next to ‘men’ indicating ‘women’ as someone to serve and assist ‘men’. Further reasons are the strong patrilineal family values portraying women as self-denied, passive persons whose eternal goal is to manage a good marriage and raise children, the injustice of depriving the women from properly share big dowry and hindering women in frequently participation in the public sphere of work and entertainment. Moreover because of being women as they always undergo the pressure to act the rules of perfect women (i.e. as perfect mothers, wives, in-laws and daughters) they are pursued to neglect the development of their self-consciousnesses. If in any case, a woman tries to establish her as a distinctive ‘self’ she will simply raise the eye-brows of the society surrounding her and step into the whirlpool of criticisms rising both from the intra and extra-familial levels.

However, as the empirical data suggest, despite encountering several socio-religious constraints, as the Hindu women of Khankhanapur are increasingly attaining higher level education and having income generating opportunities offered by some local NGOs, self perception among them has started to change towards a unique direction. For example, Rajasree Dutta, who is getting her university level education at Rajendra College, Faridpur considers her as an individual ‘self’ who should have her own right to decide and plan her life independently. She is not however against her womanly roles (as wife and mother) but as an

educated woman she regards it that she should be considered as a person with her own dignity and personality both by her family and society. Similar is the perception of Shathi Rani Shaha who is working as a NGO worker in Bhashantapur (a village nearly Khankhanapur) and Dipa Rani Karmakar, a school teacher of Khankhanapur Tamijuddin Khan Girl's School. Such a positive trend of perceiving and constructing the 'self' is indeed indication an illuminating hope for changing the women's position in a rigid Hindu social setting like Khankhanapur creating for them significant 'spaces' where they will have the prestige to be evaluated both as distinguished 'selves' and active 'persons' with their own rights and respective choices.

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