

THE FEMALE CHILD IN A FAMILY SETTING

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The paper deals with themes that place the child in the cultural context and presents empirical data gathered from a study on traditional craftsmen's families. Socialisation practices begin early in a child's life. Here, a girl child is at a disadvantage as the tradition of India is to over-indulge the male at the cost of the female. The data from the empirical study show that there is a discernible relationship between the nature of the parental occupation, the eco-cultural milieu and the specific aspects of the child's socialisation.

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The past year has seen a spurt of publications on the girl child. Many of the papers are clones of earlier ones. The self-perpetuations occur through citations becoming circular, until a body of knowledge is assumed to have been created. The sum and substance of much of this writing concern the low status of the girl, her limited opportunities for education and the gender bias in the home. The television screen has also sensitised people to the plight of the girl child as a drudge.

To my way of thinking, the examples are pulled out of context. For too long, the predictors of adult behaviour have been sought in the family nexus. Maternal socialization has been treated as the key variable for the explanation of fairly stable traits in the young. We now know that the socialization by the other members of the family and clan, as well as by the neighbourhood, school and the mass media are also potent as possibilities. Some of the recent research supports the pervasiveness of the larger culture. In many cases, especially regarding sex stereotyping, it was found that children tended to mouth the sentiments that were generally accepted in the culture than those that they specifically heard in their own families.

Themes in the first part of the paper place the child in the cultural context. The next part of the paper discusses empirical data from a study on traditional craftsmen's families. This is an ethnographic study and is a clear description of a pre-industrial set up, where gender roles and occupational skills constitute the warp and the weft of the family.

Post-industrialised societies espouse a different set of values. As Ivan Illich points out in his book on *Gender*, the more natural and symbiotic interdependence of the two sexes has been replaced by sexism. The current devaluation of the female is really a product of the changed paradigm. Today, we tend to assess a people's culture or knowledge not in terms of what they do or know, but in terms of how many years of formal education they have had. With this formula, the woman comes out badly.

Lastly, we use terms like 'mainstream' to refer to people like ourselves (those who use English for communication and read learned journals) and refer to people a little different in their reading tastes as part of a 'sidestream'. With a little more objectivity and distancing, we might perceive that a large bulk of the population, which has for centuries been carrying on the process of living, does constitute the mainstream.

There are several studies on the restrictive experience of female adolescence, on the hundred deprivations and humiliations faced by the girl. On these, I do not dwell in this paper. This does not imply that I consider the large implications of these findings as unimportant, rather that the study we have just initiated in 22 Women's Studies Centres across the country (sponsored by the Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Welfare, Government of India) will provide cross-cultural data on a magnitude not available earlier. Those results we await.

Cultural Themes in the Indian Context

The political and social history of a country, its geographical features, the meta-physical belief systems, ecological and economic factors—all these together determine the empirical everyday reality for its people. In turn, these influence the attitudes to and the treatment of the next generation. A study of socialization is like looking into the mirror of adult values. Over a history of several centuries and a multiplicity of sub-cultures, there is an amazing degree of continuity in Indian culture, and some of the major themes seem to have been-durable over time, and are generalizable across regions. There are, of course, exceptions to the themes discussed here, sometimes dramatic ones. Nevertheless, the mainstream of Indian culture is characterized by certain identifiable features.

There are numerous sources, academic and literary from which the themes discussed have been derived. Some of these are modest studies, frequently conducted by master's degree students in the universities across the country. Comprehensive reviews of these researches can be found elsewhere.

The first of these is family solidarity or familism' as it has been termed. Above all else, loyalty to the family is expected of each member. Every person is also a representative of his family in the outside world; even the earliest socialization of the child uses this approach. The family includes the extended family, usually all the members of the patrilineal kin. Any act that is a threat to family cohesion will be dealt with strictly, and though within the family, a pattern of alternating fission and fusion can be identified, the value is for unity and mutual dependence within the family. In this context, any excessive expression of individuality would be seen as a threat to the cohesiveness of the family and the social group. The boundary line between *inside* and *outside* is clearly delineated, and friendship relations outside the kin group are legitimized by the use of kinship terms!

Harmony and the absence of conflict are highly valued within the family. In fact, they are the essence of family solidarity. Decisions are by consensus, never by vote, and even consensus is often a garb worn by authority. Age hierarchy is another of the cultural themes that appears to be a part of the continuing tradition. Status goes with chronology. The older the person, the higher his ritual status, and, generally, also his authority status within the family. A great deal of value is attached to age and deference for older people; this is the most consistent aspect of socialisation. The counterpart of respect for older people is not necessarily the lack of it for younger people, but frequently it does work out that way.

The supremacy of the male is another cultural theme. It is so well established that the average Indian is surprised even to be queried about it. Whatever the ecology of the social group, even in communities where women may be the bread-winners, the male is considered superior. Within the family, the sense of the inferiority of the female is pervasive. The sex ratio is unfavourable for girls and forces us to conclude

that the survival of the girl is a matter of indifference in a considerable number of families. The birth of a son gives a woman status and she invests herself in her son's future, creating a deep symbiotic bond. The son who is over-indulged by the mother, treats the father as a distant authority figure, more to be dreaded than loved. The neglect of the female, her constant devaluation and the requirement that she be submissive at all times, as well as, the over-valuation of the male have grim consequences for mental health in adulthood. The suicides and murders of young married women are the result of several complex social factors, including greed and consumerism, but the origin of the malaise can be traced to the gender bias.

In the language of science familiar to us, human beings come as the final product of evaluation, different in major ways from animals. In the classification system of the West, and implicit in the use of the English language, the divine, the human and animal are separate. While this is not untrue in India, the categorization is only on the surface. In people's minds, these are intersecting sets.

In the world view of Indians, gods and demons, people and animals relate in a kind of net-work. The belief in re-birth and *karma* (the continuity of experience across births), adds to the complexity of the explanatory systems. A child is God's gift, and his/her arrival not controlled by the parents in any substantial way. He/she may be a reborn ancestor. His/her illnesses may be the result of an unsatisfied spirit that is free-floating or of the 'evil-eye' of a jealous neighbour. A handicapped child's disability may be the result of some previous sin to be worked out by the parents; the focus tends to be not on his/her rehabilitation, but on the parental sacrifice involved in his/her upbringing. Placating the gods, or turning away the wrath of a malefic planet at a given time, may take precedence over caring for a sick child.

In the upbringing of the child, there are two cultural constants to be borne in mind: one is the parental confidence in maturation (over learning) and the other is the lack of praise as a technique of modifying behaviour. The infant is considered 'fresh from God' and, therefore, in no need of any rules. He/she is fed whenever he/she wants it, if food is available. It is unlikely for any kind of a schedule to be imposed on the young child. Feeding, sleeping, elimination, play—all the main experiences of infancy are initiated by the child. No serious efforts are made to teach the child anything—skills emerge as the infant grows up, with little adult aid or intervention. Nevertheless, the child by the age of three is more or less responsible for his/her basic needs, and there are always siblings and cousins to help along. Until the age of six, the child has very few demands made on him/her to achieve any specific developmental goal.

Around the age of six, the girl child finds that she has to take part in a large number of tasks in the household. Some of them would be related to earning a livelihood and others to sustain and maintain the household that is economically marginal. It is also the age at which other children start formal education. Many schools are uncompromising in their discipline and in their demand for homogenized behaviour and the child finds herself in the adult world, with the lowest status among the other children in the school. School is where formal skills of numeracy and literacy are learned. The freedom and fun of childhood are over.

The technique of discipline most frequently used by parents is that of a punishment for wrong-doing. Rewards are infrequent, and praise is almost non-existent. Some of the punishments may be in the form of reprimands and threats rarely enforced, but they are given all the same. It is felt that praising a child to her face will spoil her and lead her 'to think too much of herself. The deep-rooted fear of *ahamkara*

(egoism) in traditional thought may be one of the reasons for non praise. Also, since the family is visualized as an organic unit, it is likely that praising the child is seen as equivalent to patting oneself on the back! The child has to derive a sense of right and wrong from the acts which are punished. Likewise, the sense of well-being may have to come from the fact of someone else being punished! Other people's opinions are held out as the reasons for conforming to the rules; breaking the code will bring shame upon the family. Shame, rather than guilt is thus cultivated as the mechanism for right conduct.

The Female Role in Craft Families

The vignettes on parental socialization of girls in Varanasi and Sanganeer presented here come from a larger study on the socialization of children for competence, a study undertaken in selected occupational groups, from the perspective of developmental social psychology.

The family was the unit of sampling. Traditional craft communities in Sanganeer, Rajasthan and Varanasi, and communities pursuing farming in Rudrapur, U.P. and Chhattarpur, Delhi were identified, and fifty families from each of them were selected for the study. Children between the ages of 5 and 16 years were observed at various times of the day and interviewed where possible. Parents and other family members who were the salient caretakers and socializers were also observed in their interactions and interviewed about their aspirations for their daughters and sons, their practices and techniques of disciplining their children, and their perception on how these equipped them for future role performance. It was expected that there would be a discernible relationship between the nature of the parental occupation, the eco-cultural milieu and the specific aspects of the child's socialization.

In the course of the study, it became apparent that even the concept of childhood as we understood it, belied an academic and socio-economic status bias. The span of childhood was directly related to the economic standing of the family; the poorer the family the earlier childhood ended, and adult roles and responsibilities forced on children. The observation is common to many non-technological and proliferate cultures, but the re-definition of the childhood span posed problems even for the sampling in this study. In the Sanganeer community, for instance, there were sons from the ages of 5 to 16 years, but daughters only upto 13 years of age: the older girls were married into families outside the village, since as in many parts of the northern region, village exogamy prevailed in Rajasthan as well. This first experience in locating the sample suggested that boyhood and girlhood were very different experiences, and that, a proper analysis of childhood should treat the two separately.

In Sanganeer, the families selected for the study lived in two *mohallas* adjoining each other. They were all engaged in the preparation, block-printing and marketing of the material, known everywhere as the Sanganeeri prints. They were *Chippas*, claiming descent from the saint *Namdev*, who was also by legend, the first printer, being endowed with divine powers to introduce the art of printing. Pride in being *Chippa Namdev vamshi* is reinforced through the activities of the caste group like meetings, distribution of the annual reports and even group marriages, where the poorer members are encouraged to keep their alliances within the *jati* and the expenses borne by the Jati Association. One practice, which has its continuity thus ensured, is that of pre-pubertal marriage for girls.

This traditional craft which started as a cottage industry to serve the needs of the family has grown to a large-scale operation involving the production in bulk and the export of the material.

The managerial tasks were handled entirely by the men, while children above 14 years and women assisted in the printing. In many families, the women's earning from printing was a substantial contribution to the family income; frequently, the new daughter-in-law would be required to learn to print, along with the household tasks that were her duties. Nevertheless, there was no aspect of the craft which was the special domain of the female; had all the women stopped working on the craft, it would not have suffered seriously.

As in many communities across the world, the women's responsibilities lay with cooking, housekeeping, care of children and maintenance of the religious and social rituals. In the socialization of girls, we found that self-reliance in caring for one's own needs was developed early among all children, particularly girls. Responsibility was another trait for which parents and other adults in the family gave positive reinforcement, but it was interesting to see how this was equated with obedience and 'good behaviour'. It was in the parental socialization for achievement that the contrast between boys and girls became most apparent. Girls were educated for two or three years on an average (there was only one girl in the sample who had completed even five years of school) and literacy was to serve the main purpose of their being able to write letters to the parental home after marriage, and to keep household accounts. From the same families, there were boys who had gone to college, and there were a couple of them who had completed their master's degrees. This difference was dramatic in our perspective, but even the most intelligent and articulate of our respondents argued for its perpetuation in the cause of maintenance of traditional values.

The other craft community studied was that of the Ansari Muslims in Varanasi, who claim that the weaving of silk sarees has been a continuous tradition for fourteen centuries. The Momin Ansaris are strict adherents of the practice of caste endogamy; there is no alternative to a marriage being arranged within the *Biradiri*. Most of the marriages take place within the same *mohalla*, frequently among first cousins. The ideal age for marriage is considered 14 to 16 years for girls and 18 to 20 years for boys. Divorce is possible, but it is the man's prerogative to ask for divorce, never the woman's. Once the Head of the community, the *Mahto* and the elders have heard a man's case, he is permitted the divorce, and has to pay back Rs. 151/- which he received as a gift from the bride's parents. He has to undertake to pay for the woman's maintenance for a period of 4 months and ten days.

They take pride in their following the teachings of the *Koran* to the last letter. They do not educate their daughters and they do not practise family planning. For both these, they quote doctrinal support. The males in the family attend the weekly prayers in the Masjid on Fridays, and say their *Namaaz* five times a day.

As in the case of Sanganeer, in Varanasi among the weavers, the wage-earners are from the same caste group as the owners of the property and the entrepreneurs, sharing the religious rituals and the social activities of the neighbourhood. Young boys are apprenticed to a weaver after the age of 7 years; by 14 years of age, they have mastered the craft and are able to weave a complete saree. The apprenticeship

may be within the family or outside it, and in both cases there is a rigorous schedule of work maintained. The tasks performed by the womenfolk constitute an essential component of the entire process of weaving a saree. The girls fill the spools with the dyed yarn to be used as the weft yarn of the sarees. They use a simple spindle arrangement to transfer the yarn from a larger wooden wheel to the spool. One of the finishing tasks in the saree is also done by the girls and the women. The saree has to be reversed and stretched out on a frame and the loose threads between the *butis* have to be delicately cut off. This is usually done after the sale is made and before the saree is delivered.

The houses are so constructed and the work areas so planned as to ensure the segregation of the sexes. While boys are constantly playing on the streets or watching the activities associated with weaving, young girls are discouraged from playing downstairs. They have to spend the entire day in the restricted upper storey of the house, learning household tasks and spool-filling. If they accompany the family on a visit to a relative in the *mohalla*, they must be properly attired, and wear a *burkah* after the age of 9 or 10 years. Only a few of the girls had ever been on an outing to a park in the vicinity, and almost none of the unmarried girls had been out of Varanasi. In a group of 100 girls in the age range 5 to 16 years, two girls could remember going to Ajmer on a pilgrimage along with the male members of the family. There were many adult women we interviewed, who had never stepped out of the *mohalla*; they had been born there, married there and had their children, who in turn would marry others in the same community. The concept of insularity was never more clearly illustrated.

Again it was in the area of education and occupational skills, that the contrast in the parental socialization of boys and girls was most evident. Formal school education seemed to have little value for a majority of the families, since they did not send even the boys to a regular school. Out of a total sample of 205 children in the 50 families selected, only three of the boys attended a regular school, while 24 of them attended the *Madrās*—the parochial school. Four of the young girls were also attending the *Madrās*. All the other children under 16 years were out of school, learning the craft skills in the case of boys and mostly domestic skills in the case of girls. Obviously, the aspirations that the parents had for their children did not relate to the advantages that could be gained by a formal education. When asked about this, the men said that weaving was a traditional skill and one that had to be learned early; that weaving gave the person a certain amount of freedom to work at his own pace and that they would never wish for white collar jobs for their sons. They did realise that the ability to read and write helped in the trade and transaction of their business, and felt that knowledge of English was useful. It was only in the wealthy families that even this was conceded; for most of the *Karigars*, the weavers who were paid a piece wage for weaving a saree, the educational system offered less choice than apprenticeship in the traditional craft.

Most of the girls had to be satisfied with learning the *Koran* by rote from an elderly relative. This memorization of the verses of the *Koran* was the only education considered necessary; in fact, some parents said in the interview, that education of any other kind was not only unnecessary but dangerous, as the girls would begin to get ideas of their own.

The system of authority in the family was so clearly defined, that being responsible coincided with being obedient. The internalization of the values of the community

was ensured in the early years of the childhood span, so that the consideration of alternatives seldom arose. The two craft communities, distinctly different in region and religion, still had a great deal of similarity in the organization of the craft in the homesteads, and in the female role in the process. Some of the differences in the participation of the girls and the women in the craft process in Sanganeer and Varanasi have been touched upon; nevertheless, in both cases, the women do play a considerable part in the family occupation and add to the income of the family. The low status ascribed to the girl child is not even perceived, since the issue of gender equality would not be considered, even hypothetically, in the two communities. The men and the women alike appeared to share the views on sex role differentiation, and they conveyed this through example and precept in the upbringing of their children. There was no perceptible generation gap.

The women were allowed no control over the means of production or the means of reproduction; their world was restricted to the family and kin; their work in the craft was useful, their householding essential. The two factors that kept them integrated as individuals appeared to come, partly at least, from the nature of the occupational task; there was a satisfaction in working with one's hands and in working together with others in a familiar setting, where a sense of competition was minimal. The other observation was that there was solidarity arising from the common experience of being female in a world where the male was clearly superior. To describe it as a feeling that 'sisterhood is strong' would probably be to overstate the case, nevertheless, their feeling that they were all in it together seemed to sustain them. Where choice is non-existent or highly limited, conflicts arising from choice have perforce to be minimal. In both the communities, the female is subtly the lesser of the species and the division of labour leaves her with the jobs that are at once both less skilled and less valued.

Epilogue

The relationship between choice and conflict is well-recognized. Where there is no choice—the roles are stereotyped, experience is monotonous and the daily routine uneventful. Girls in the family setting are frequently in no-choice situations—but there is no obvious resentment, only health problems both organic and psychosomatic. Exposure to the outside world, through the school system is generally of minimal duration. Where this goes beyond ten years of formal schooling, the girl is no longer ignorant of what she is being denied. She wishes for greater interaction with the world outside the home.

In a recent study on adolescent girls in rural and urban areas, a linear relationship was found between socio-economic status, years of education and gender role conflict in the rural areas, and in the urban areas. Education is a subversive activity and no policy maker or programme implementer should be unaware of this fact. What the family can do for a child is extended by the social institutions of the school. Even if the teachers reflect the gender prejudices prevailing in that society, the curricular content may provide a contrary message. Such messages accumulate and become a body of knowledge for the girl child.

The girl grows up with a variety of competencies in the household and in the craft or trade; nevertheless, her tasks are considered less skilled and are often invisible. In a

traditional setting, she is still able to perform some tasks that enhance her sense of worth. It is when a family moves out of a traditional occupational pattern to a non-man's land of competition of the modern educational and occupational market, that the status of girls is further lowered. Social intervention may have to be planned first for these girls who have to encounter economic, social class and gender prejudices.