Becoming Bonafide Woman

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Analyzing the prevailing marriage and family practices in the locality, this article portrays how these micro institutions contribute to enculturation of girls and women by shaping a typical kind of womanhood. In doing so, it also sheds light on some of the crucial aspects of being a girl/woman in Nepal’s Tarai and the process of becoming a woman. In addition to the way women’s selves are shaped, this section also illuminates the way these instilled values are nurtured and reproduced. Some important areas of socialization, family and marriage are presented here, as each of them has respectively contributed in influencing and maintaining their self. This article also portrays how the very process of construing their self and becoming woman itself is embedded within the gendered and hierarchical social structure.

[Keywords : Family, Marriage, Socialization, Nepal, Tarai]

1. Introduction

On the basis of analysis of prevailing marriage and family practices in the study area, this article portrays how these micro institutions contribute to enculturation of girls and women by shaping a typical kind of womanhood. In doing so, it also sheds light on some of the crucial aspects of being a girl/woman in Nepal’s Tarai and the process of becoming a woman. In addition to the way women’s selves are shaped, this article also emphasizes the way these instilled values are nurtured and reproduced. Some remarkable aspects of socialization, family and marriage are dealt on here, as each of them has correspondingly contributed in influencing and maintaining their self.

This article bases on information generated in the course of ethnographic fieldwork carried out for my Ph.D. research during 2012-2015. I carried out this

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research at a social cluster among Tarai Brahmin women in a central Tarai district of Nepal. To respect the privacy of the research participants, I have given pseudonym of Lakhanpur to the field site. I have employed various anthropological techniques and tools to generate information from the research participants. I have realized that reflective understanding and experience of conducting fieldwork needs to be reckoned as an imperative part of data collection techniques in anthropological explorations. I adopted this ontological position regarding social phenomena as different from natural phenomena, and which also assumes that all social phenomena are socially constructed and thus they must be positioned in time, space and culture (Creswel, 2007 : 20).

Socialization can broadly be considered as a process of changing a biological individual into a social ‘person’. As socialization requires a long period of involvement, it is regarded as a process which takes place over the period. This is the process through which individuals are inculcated with certain values, skills and attitudes necessary for playing expected roles in their social matrix. During and through this course, individuals become members of a society, embodying in their own experience and acting out their learned behaviour. It mainly includes but is not confined to the training of children and the immature. Nevertheless, as Mayer states (1970 : xi ), immaturity is a relative concept which can be assigned taking into consideration factors other than age. Grossly, it can be regarded as life long process.

Leaper and Friedman (2007) have portrayed various aspects of socialization which can have critical consequences on adult roles and functioning. They argue that men’s dominance and sexist practices can be traced back to children’s gender-typed everyday interactions. Social-structural factors, such as division of labor inside the home and patriarchy in the larger society, contribute to gender socialization. In line with what Leaper and Friedman have claimed, the study participants from my field area have also experienced that women learn gender values as early as the childhood socialization process.

A typical Maithil Brahmin girl in Lakhanpur learns certain qualities to be a good girl and thereby ultimately to become a good woman in the future. She learns gender values from her early childhood. Different cultural values are instilled into the girl/woman throughout her life and during this process the society expects her to exhibit these qualities in her everyday life.

Shyness, discipline, tolerance and competence in the household works are qualities of a good woman. She needs to learn to cover her face with the Ghunghat, not to speak up to the seniors and not to laugh in loud voice. (Woman, 51)

The above quote represents the qualities expected to be inculcated in girls through the process of enculturation to make them grown up women confined into the domestic chore. Socialization contributes to instilling good conduct, in
regulating impulses, instincts and temptations. A good woman is supposed to control her emotions, especially her anger. As a good wife she is not supposed to show anger to her husband, whereas, it is seen as manly behavior for the husband to express his anger. All these virtues of women collectively contribute to gain and maintain *ijjat* (honour) to the family.

2. **Socialization in Lakhanpur: Beyond Biopolitics**

Ghunghat, wearing a veil, is imperative to cover the face of a married woman, especially for the young ones. The end of the Sari is used to cover one’s face. Newly married women cover their face in such a way that they only keep some space to see. Whereas, elder women cover their head, not necessarily the whole face. Wearing Ghunghat has more emblematic import than the coverage per se with the physical object. In unfolding its symbolic significance, people regard it as a part of purdah, “meaning curtain”, the word most commonly used for the system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty in much of South Asia. Papanek (1973) regards that Purdah is an important part of the life experience of many South Asian women. Papanek has observed that it is a core trait of the social systems of the area which begins after the marriage of a woman. The functional value of the Purdah system lies in its prohibition on communication between women and males outside certain categories. In Lakhanpur, Purdah is based on a set of avoidance rules between a woman and her male affine, senior than her husband.

Family members inform young girls about how they have to behave as grownups, what they are expected to do and what they are prohibited from doing. Nirmala Devi, was married when she was seventeen. Her husband dies few years ago while working in India. She lives in Lakhapur nearby her natal home along with her son and a daughter. Talking to me in her Angna whilst looking at her daughter who was studying at the local college, she told me that:

> We teach our daughters what they should do and are forbidden to do. If they do not obey, the parents will beat them. Sometimes, we also advise them illustrating the behavior of a good girl from the locality. If that does not work, we also convince them with the negative example of some women who are in woe because of their disobedience.

They still carry on and reiterate this verbally and pointing to the essentiality of direct coercive measures. In addition, some of their cultural practices have reached to the stage of biopolitics (Foucault, 1977), a disciplinary power, not in the form of control exerted from outside rather in the form of internalized ‘self-control’ which is expected to make girls and women be obedient and comply with the social norms they practices. The girls know about their secondary position in society through direct instructions and by observing the discriminatory practices in the family. The kind of importance their male siblings get in their family, the rumors
they hear about women and girls, the alteration of home following the marriage they experience, the gendered differences between their parents at home, among other things, collectively contribute to inculcating gendered values and prepare them to be a submissive.

Mayer (1970) rightly asserts that social mobility and also the major social changes involve re-socialization of people of all ages. The knowledge acquired in the form of socialization remains relevant but becomes insufficient when entering into the new institution of marriage. For Maithil Brahmin woman from Lakhanpur, the process of enculturation certainly goes on after marriage as well. It is because a newly married woman has to learn how to become a good daughter-in-law as indicated by my informant Sone Lal:

Recently married daughters-in-law have to stay inside the house. They have to be taken into strict control otherwise she will neither respect nor will take care of the senior family members. This is how after few years of Ghunghat she will learn about the rules of the family and once she passes through these years successfully, then she will be given the full-fledged authority in the family.

As Sone Lal states in the above lines, learning family values, a woman has to wait up to some years to become a full-fledged member of the family. In these years she needs to prove her loyalty to the family. In this way, though the families are there within the broader Maithil Brahmin cultural context, still further make ability (Schuurman, 2000) is perceived as crucial to make a newlywed daughter-in-law as a complete member of the family.

Young women from Lakhanpur have also internalized the need of re-socialization. As Foucault (1977) states, the institution of patriarchy has been able to make the girls and women feel such need. In a similar way the in-laws family would exert power over the daughter-in-law. Beyond the demarcation set by Foucault, the way control is exerted over these women is not only non-coercive but is rather mixed with the coercive form of direct control of their body such as physical assault and violation in case of non-compliance.

In addition to disciplining body through re-socialization, as Foucault (1977) considers, non-repressive power is exercised on their body through the modification, in the form of decorations and ornaments. After the marriage, a woman has to wear vermillion powder, pote (beads), bangles and wear a Ghunghat to cover her face. Besides alteration in the behavioral sphere re-socialization encompasses modification and material adornment.

3. **Marriage, Dahej and Women’s Self**

Marriage is considered as an essential part of personal and social life in Lakhanpur. Here my interest to discuss marriage is not to describe every detail of the ritual process as it is practiced in the locality, rather, my focus is mainly to
emphasize the inevitable and important aspects of marriage which ultimately contribute to forming and representing the situation of Maithil women. Referring to its existence from time immemorial, Lakhanpur people portray that it is essential for women to enter into conjugal life. Manoj teaches in a local primary school in Lakhanpur. He is from a reputed family of the area. He has observed about the life of women in his locality:

Following the marriage, the life of a woman depends upon her husband's family as she becomes its member. Her relation with the natal family remains simply as the matter of honor. They invite her in different feast, festivals and occasions.

A woman has to pass through certain process and rituals to get into the realm of her husband's family. Following the marriage, a woman has to get Kul Mantra, the clan hymns, to become a member of her husband's clan. This hymn legitimates her participation in the religious feast and festivals. She can acquire this from an elderly man if her husband accompanies her, otherwise, she needs to get it from an elderly woman of her husband's clan. Kul Mantra contributes to integrate her symbolically and socially into her husband's clan.

Along with integrating a woman with her husband's family, simultaneously, marriage also separates her from her natal family. By taking Kul Mantra, she symbolically departs from her natal family and gets integrated with her husband's family and clan. In this ground, as member of their clan and family, following the marriage, it is the responsibility of her husband and his family to protect her, especially that of her body, Ijjat (honour) and purity. Her body and purity is embedded not only with the honor of herself but also with that of the husband's family. If the family cannot protect her properly that may bring Daag (blemish) to her body and ultimately to the family.

She needs to be protected because she is considered vulnerable to sexual exploitation. To lessen such vulnerability it is essential to restrict her movement. People rationale that as her husband is often outside of the home, she needs to be kept in domesticity, a safe place. As her body is the most important part of her self, so, it has to be protected by being kept inside the boundary, perceived to be safer. Regarding the 'outside' as an unsafe place (for detail on household space management, see 4.3), the newly married woman is not allowed to go outside. Makhan Jha, 49, considered as a local respectable person, refers to the legend of Sita\textsuperscript{1} in the Ramayana who crossed the boundary. In case of inevitability to go outside, a woman has to cover her face with Ghunghat. Her face and identity is most important, so, she has to cover it. Not going outside of Dura is an honorable practice in Lakhanpur. The family gets further honor if she has not gone outside till she has some children or in some cases even the grandchildren.

For the assurance that a daughter-in-law does not go outside of her home, her mother-in-law is responsible to make sure that she is under her nigarani, or direct
surveillance. Newly married daughters-in-law can show their face to women but not to other men. Even inside the home, she cannot show her face to senior male members. Outside the home, she cannot show her face to all the senior male relatives. She also needs permission to chat with outsiders and strangers, especially the men.

Shankar Jha, 47, had an 18 year old daughter who was undertaking her higher secondary education at the local school. He was working at a sub-health post in the neighbouring village as a peon. He was not happy for not being able to get good government job despite his matriculation. He had observed some crucial things about the dowry:

These days amount of Dahej is accelerating as the prices of other commodities are also mounting. For a medical doctor, his parents can demand up to Rs. 35 Lakhs. Often the groom’s family does bargaining to increase Dahej amount. Sometimes, his family deliberately lies to the community pretending they have received more. It is because larger size of Dahej is associated with a family’s increased social status and it also creates the augmented base for the remaining sons.

The practices of Dahej, dowry, denotes to the cash or in-kind, things that a bride’s natal family has to provide her husband at her marriage with the exception of some clothes and jewellery which goes to herself. The practice and amount of dowry has increased following the increment in economic activities and flow of cash in Lakhanpur area. No one can think of marrying out a daughter without paying dowry. It increases in line with the groom’s family’s economic status, and education and employment status of the groom.

If the groom’s family is not satisfied with Dahej at the wedding or later on they want to have more Dahej, they express their dissatisfaction to bride’s natal family. To express their dissatisfaction, the groom’s family may apply brutality upon the bride. Such violence is aimed to transcend the individual body of the bride and affect her natal family. In this context, the bride’s body becomes a medium through which pressure and violence is transcended towards her natal family. As she is not allowed to come out of the house easily, it is not possible for her to communicate her grievances to outsiders. She can get access only to those whom her husband’s family lets her talk with. In such situations, she may find herself with multiple layers of sufferings.

Local people take such violence as a ordinary phenomenon and accept it as a normal practice. As a normalized practice, Dahej and accompanied violence, gets instilled into the mind of local people, including women and girls through their experience, gossip, hearing or rumours. Witnessing the incident or the rumour itself are equally powerful to inculcate fear inside people. The illustrations of unspecific events often point to the generality of such a situation. The story of beating, killing and any other torture, though the incident has not happened here
and now, but still people believe it because the collective perception is that it is likely to happen and that it can happen to anyone living in a similar situation. Such stories, real or mythical, affect parents, family members and girls through the symbolic imagery of the popular culture. Calculation of numbers, repeated telling, sometimes the escape of the perpetrators or local dismissal of the violence reinforces the terror of dowry and ultimately builds it as an inevitable phenomenon leading to the creation and perpetuation of a culture of fear. The culture of fear is so pervasive among girls and their parents that everyone finds herself/himself in the situation of helplessness. Rumors and gossip, in this way, working covertly (Stewart & Strathern, 2003: 29), can produce results regardless of verification of the incidents.

Janaki Mishra, 60, does not have any regret that both of his daughters were not educated. He has seen the complications that dowry has brought the area:

These days parents want to educate also to their girls thinking that they will have better life in the future. However, there is a problem in educating them. When she does B. A. (referring to graduation), it is not possible to marry her with a boy having less than her level of education. Along with the increment of groom’s educational attainment, the amount of Dahej also increases in parallel. This situation ultimately discourages the family from educating the girl and opts for her earlier marriage. Moreover, it has also led to the increasing practice of examining the sex of the fetus and going for abortion in the case of a girl child.

As Janaki Mishra had mentioned in above quote, sex selective abortion in this way becomes an extreme form of gender based violence. It denies the inherent rights of the female child for life and to be born. Additionally, it is stigmatized in such a way that it often has a harmful impact on the mother’s health. When the sex of the fetus is known, it already becomes too late to go for abortion. On top of that, to cover the abortion, most of the time couples either choose conventional practices which are often detrimental, leading up to the death of a mother. If they go to the private clinic, where there is no assurance of the knowledge and skills of the service providers, this also leads to unsafe abortion.

In line with several studies, Abrejo, Shaikh, & Rizvi (2009) have come up that there is high rate of sex selective abortion, more specifically, female feticide, in South Asian countries. As widespread in these countries and contributing in maternal mortality, this is a public health problem. Abortion in certain case became legal in Nepal in 2002, however, sex selective abortion is not legal (Frost, Puri & Hinde, 2013). Analyzing the changes in the sex ratio at birth since legalization, these authors show that there is association of sex selective abortion with legalization of abortion.

Lamichhane et al. (2011), based on their studies among the health workers, has found that despite knowing the prohibitory provision of sex selective abortion
health workers perform abortion thinking that these women might seek unsafe services elsewhere. All of these scholars have presented discrimination against women as prime factor for female feticide. Hatlebakk (2017) conducted a recent study based on what he calls as a unique family survey in Nepal to investigate the economic consequences of having a first-born girl. His study focused on the potential costs of having too many children in Nepal. I do not agree with one of his statement in the article which says that abortion of female fetuses is still not a problem in Nepal. My study findings, mainly based on the information from the natives of Tarai, contradict with his claim. Local people in Lakhanpur are aware that the phenomenon of sex selective abortion widely exists there. As George and Dahiya (1998) have shown from their study in Haryana, “parents tend to be calculative in choosing the sex of the next child and the decision is based on the birth order, sex sequence of previous children and number of sons” (p.1).

A husband’s presence in a woman’s life has been perceived by women as pervasive. When they get sindur, vermillion powder, from their husband on their forehead, he is there in their life everywhere. It symbolizes the marital status of a woman. An Ahivat (a married woman whose husband is still alive) woman only wear vermillion and she becomes Musmat when he dies. Following his death, she has to refrain from all her decoration together with wearing red clothes and vermillion powder. More than a decade ago, there began a trend of wearing red clothes and vermillion powder among the hill origin widows (Dahal, 2008) but this has not reached the Madheshi women yet.

The necessity of marriage is not confined only for acceptable conjugal life but ultimately for the procreation. Infertility calls into question the meaning and purpose of both their marriage and their very existence (Mathews & Mathews, 1986). Unlike their claim, a blame for involuntary childlessness goes to a woman and she is not considered complete unless she gives birth or enters into motherhood. Inability to conceive is blamed as a woman’s infertility she is stigmatized for this as a Banjh, barren. A woman will get honor in the family and society only when she gives birth.

Along with the educational attainment of girls, families are getting educated daughters-in-law. Teasing such newlyweds, elder women express their dissatisfaction pointing towards their immaturity even to distinguish normal water and holy water for worship (Aaike chhau di mairam, paniko kahe jal). I have found this as an interesting indicator of declining religiosity among youth. To remind such daughters-in-law about their ultimate position in the society they also use another adage which equates the temporality of women’s upper hand in the family with that of rail ride from which eventually they have to get off (Mogiko muktari, patrike sawari, women’s upper hand is just like a rail ride). Elder women are using such analogies and satire to socialize newly weds to realize their subordinate position in the family.
4. Conclusions

This article shows how the micro level cultural institutions like family and marriage, the foundation of the social and cultural life of people from Nepal’s Tarai, can contribute in shaping the typical kind of self and situation of women. The very foundation of social life themselves create the foundation for the suppressive self of women. In Lakhanpur, marriage is considered as important to have the honorable identity of a woman in the locality, however, paradoxically, Dahej, an inherent constituent of it, is threatening the life and devaluing women’s status in the society. The practice of Dahej and associated rumors and various incidents related with it, keeps women always vulnerable and in the zone of danger from the ones whom she is supposed to get protection.

Dahej has become a symbol of biopolitics (Foucault, 1977) which exerts social control to keep women and girls inside the domestic chore and moreover a source of constant threat when they begin to understand and observe the weddings and marital consequences in their surroundings. Realization of the cost of Dahej on creating complexity in arranging and maintaining marital bond, mainly contributes to limit them in the form of internalized control. In spite of its social and cultural significance, Dahej has become a symbol of commodification (Henderson & Petersen, 2002) of marriage. Groom’s parents want return from the investment they made for the study of their son. Taking Dahej as return on son’s studies clearly shows the encroachment of excessive degree of commodification into the micro institution of marriage.

Agreeing with social learning theorists like Kretchmar (2011) who claims that girls learn gender appropriate behavior in their everyday interaction with the adults, I maintain that children learn through the observation and imitation of the behaviors of same-sex adults. As the learning becomes internalized, then the children begin to display gender appropriate behaviors even in the absence of reinforcement from any agent and/or agency. This article also portrays how the very process of construing their self and becoming woman itself is embedded within the gendered and hierarchical social structure. For the maintenance of such inequality, both the coercive and non-repressive measures are in operation in Lakhanpur to socialize and re-socialize girls and women. Re-socialization of grown up women through the process of marriage and also family covertly portrays a woman as an immature and thus rationalizes the need of re-socialization.

While looking at this practice of physical confinement of women in the house, one can infer that women of reproductive age are kept inside. This implies that women are more vulnerable during their reproductive age. Restricting the mixing of blood and keeping the biological aspect of lineage in its line, physical confinement contributes to control her sexual and reproductive behaviour. However, the discursive logic put forth in defense of this practice is the protection
of women. When protection equates to physical confinement, in essence, then it allows enacting body politic (Schep-Hughes & Lock, 1987) euphemized in the name of protection.

**Footnote**

1. Sita was living an exiled life in a forest along with her husband Ram and his brother Laxman. Provoked by a deception of a demon King Ravan, when she crossed the boundary created by her brother-in-law, Ravan kidnapped her in absence of Ram and Laxman.

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