

CHILD REARING: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Childrearing, a fundamental socializing process, in every society occurs in accordance with the cultural norms of the society. Childrearing is the process of promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood (Brooks,2012). It also involves creating an ethics and value systems with social norms that contribute to the child's beliefs, culture and customs. The process of growing up as a female or male involves significant amount of intricacies and complexities related to the construction of image of the self and of others which is constantly revalidated. This progressive process of gender constructing, which an individual goes through, gets influenced by cultural perceptions of gender. This way gender becomes a social construct which refers to norms, values, customs and practices by which biological differences are transformed, exaggerated and accommodated into a wider social system.

Culture influences the perception, tastes, thinking and responses of individual. Perception of social realities is determined by individual's experience and by the collective experience that culture transmits. In the process of childrearing, the child gets socially conditioned on thinking and acting. Gender concept is rooted to culture and childrearing as an activity is determined by cultural practices; therefore, gender construct itself is the product of cultural practices. This implies that there is a close interactivity among culture, childrearing and gender concept. Therefore, an individual's interpretation of gender is a reflection of the cultural conditioning, which s/he has undergone in the process of childrearing. Masculine and feminine identities are the cultural projections of the biological differences. So, by simply living in the world one gets exposed to myriad images and ideas about appropriate and desirable masculine and feminine identities.

The construction of gender is not something which happens only to children but it happens to other people as well. It is also not something which happens once only. However, the foundations of gender construction are laid very early in the life of the individual with the

childrearing process. Through this process the child gets into the loop of constructing and reconstructing gender identities. Because masculinity and femininity are not biologically determined they have to be socially constructed and taught. Every culture has its way of valuing girls and boys and assigning different behaviour patterns, attributes, attitudes, roles, rights and expectations. All the social and cultural packaging that is done for girls and boys from birth onwards is called gendering. Such gendering becomes visible, in a prominent way, in childrearing process during which biological sexes are attached with gender identities of women and men along historical and cultural lines.

Gendered Cultural Practice: Indian Context

Childrearing in Indian context gives ample evidences of the culturally determined and reinforced practices of gendering process. Indian society, notwithstanding a few irregular exceptions, has been patriarchal in nature where men have been heads of households, inheritors of lineage and property. Indian society ascribes more cultural significance to men. Thus, the real-life gendering of girls and boys is based on and reinforced by a patriarchal ideology that makes men superior.

Though there are many causes that add to the typical gendering that happens in India and the eventual fluctuation of power differentials, the prominent ones are male chauvinism, perception that women are defenseless, traditional patriarchal systems etc. Differences in access to resources and opportunities for a girl start at her house itself. Girls grow up with the notion of temporary membership within the natal home. Rituals provide one of the important means through which girls come to realize the inevitability of their transfer from the natal home to that of the husband. In fact, in the process of socialization of girls, there is considerable emphasis on the possible need to bow before the wishes of the husband and his family and on submissiveness and obedience as feminine ideals in general.

Rituals and proverbs

Elders bless young girls and women by wishing them a large number of sons (and just one daughter). The notion of the greater value of sons is further strengthened by the existence, with regional variations, of special *pujas* (worship) and *vratas* (fasts and observances) that women perform to have sons and to ensure the long life of sons already born. Leela Dube captures the recognition and the special value accorded to male children in families in the following words;

...While surrounded by affectionate and appreciative parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, a little girl of three or four may hear a maidservant exclaim: 'Oh what a sweet child! How wonderful it would have been if this was a boy!'... The desirability of having sons and the undesirability of having more daughters is made explicitly, often by outsiders: 'Four daughters? Each one will take ten thousand rupees and walk out of the house. Bringing up a daughter is like pouring water in sand.' Parents who have only daughters are pitied. Their future is bleak for they will have no support or succor in old age...

This, however, does not entirely negate the significance of a girl child. This is to only show that the number of occasions the presence of daughter is celebrated is far less as compared to a boy. The attitude of kinship in particular and society in general towards a girl greatly determines her access to resources and opportunities. An Oriya proverb when equating a daughter with *ghee*, in a way, presents a girl's merits. The proverb says both are valuable but both begin to stink if not disposed of in time! In view of the patrilineal kinship over large parts of India, it is an obvious step to ascribe to it the devaluation of daughters and the son-preference, which are salient features in contemporary Indian families.

Leela Dube's translation of the text of a Marathi street play 'Mulagi Jhali Ho' by Jyoti Mhaspsekar sums up the do's and don'ts administered to a post-pubertal girl. Though originally of a street play, the following passage clearly shows expectations from a girl.

"Do not abandon the vow of womanhood taken by you.

You have to follow your mother, grandmother, and great grandmother

You have to mind the hearth and children.

Do not ask odd questions.

Do not exceed the boundaries.

Do not get out control.

Do not abandon the vow of womanhood.

Do not speak with your face up.

Be inside the house.

Wash clothes, clean the utensils

Cook and serve food

Clear the leavings and remove the soiled plates.

Sew and embroider.

Sweep and draw designs on the floor.

Water the *Tulsi* plant.
Circumambulate the sacred tree.
Observe fasts and perform *vrats*.
Bend your neck downwards.
Look downwards.
Walk without looking up.
Do not let your eyes wander.
Do not abandon the vow of womanhood.”

Feminine and masculine role differences

Children are taught the distinction between feminine work and masculine work and this distinction becomes only sharper as the child grows up. Such division of labour is conveyed to little girls without necessarily generating a feeling of discrimination by engaging them in games that will prepare them to take up feminine tasks and those games which involve kitchen work, dolls, marriage, baby care etc. Learning from these ‘feminine’ games, girls start assisting their mothers in kitchen work, serving food, washing clothes, caring for younger siblings, and looking after the aged. Boys may wash their own clothes, but they are discouraged from washing others clothes, especially those of other children as this task is generally handled by girls. Some of the household tasks are strictly not for boys, such as brooming and washing utensils. Thus boys and girls naturally internalize their gender-based tasks and the natural division of work. The socialization of girl children is markedly different from that of boys as regards to preparing for the role-playing. Often, inadvertently though, work around the kitchen, menial and dirty household works and childcare are projected as tasks that are feminine. This traditional typifying of tasks and their appropriateness and inappropriateness for adult females and males get reflected in the work assigned to boys and girls.

An important component of this natural division of work is the effort that goes into inculcating in girl children the sense of service (*sewa*) as a necessary quality. This quality, girl children are indirectly instructed as part of the long sustaining training, should permeate into every sphere of their activity. This is easily discernible in the dining practices followed by a household. Traditionally, girl children are told that they have to eat the leftover and not by the male members of the family. Opposition, in whatever degree, is bound to attract admonitions from elders with a suggestion that the ability to adjust is the most desired quality

of females. This is true even when she is hungry. If a girl child cries for food, she is reprimanded and teased about her lack of self-restraint and for being greedy for food items.

Values for girl child

Girls are also taught to learn pain and deprivation, eat anything that is given to them and acquire the quality of self-denial. This is the part of the training for the reality that they are likely to confront in the house of the mother in law. Thus a girl child has a set of values that is vastly different from that of boys. For example, the notions of self-denial, tolerance, self-restraint, service, submissiveness etc may not find much prominence in the desired qualities of boys, but definitely feature in the context of a girl child.

Burden of family's honour

The sexuality of women more than that of men is the subject of social concerns. This has also contributed to the widely shared notions of the vulnerability of girls and the need to regulate their mobility. The appearance of puberty marks a profoundly dangerous situation and is a context for major rituals which indicates the important relationship of female purity and the prestige of the family. The honour and respectability of men and the family is protected and preserved through their women. Girl child is constantly reminded that her purity has great bearing on the honour of her family. This, however, is not the case with the male child.

Stereotyping

In the process of childrearing, boys also get stereotyped in the patriarchal culture. Boys are discouraged from being emotional, gentle, and caring or from admitting to being weak or being fearful. They are thrust into the role of breadwinners, protectors and warriors. There are widely shared notions of masculinity and what it means to boys. Boys who are gentle and soft-spoken are derisively called feminine. On the other hand, girls who are strong and in control are called manly and masculine. Families expect boys to be tough, aggressive, and always in control. They are not allowed to express feelings of weakness or vulnerability; they are not supposed to cry or to seek help. Boys get the best food and best educational opportunities their families can afford and are not expected to do any household work or return home before sunset.

Kamla Bhasin in 'Exploring Masculinity' reports the list of quality expectations of men. Men need to be rational, strong, smart, self-centred, outgoing, aggressive, brave, assertive, devious, fearless, impulsive, honest, tough, violent, hardworking, opportunistic, insensitive, extrovert, dominating and independent. However, the desired qualities of women are dissimilar and diametrically opposite to that of men. The qualities or attributes of women are

emotional, weak, beautiful, sacrificing, caring, nurturing, submissive, shy, calm, polite, sensitive, cunning, soft, introvert, compassionate, enduring, fearful, quiet, timid, tolerant and dependent. This indicates how culture influences the gender construct process and subsequent positioning of genders in the overall social framework.

Conclusion

Socialisation is the transformation of a biological being into a social being and also a vehicle of culture diffusion. Each culture has patterns of social behaviour and belief systems which are particular to itself. This means that culture provides people with a framework of perception and behaviour and people invariably behave in conformity to these cultural standards that are followed for generations. Gendered cultural practices, which are so obvious in Indian context, have been particularly imbalanced from the perspective of girl children. In the process of childrearing, children learn to understand gender concept and also know about their roles, limitations, restrictions and disabilities. Childrearing process also helps children to internalize their relative position vis-à-vis the other gender in the social framework.

Reference

Jane B. Brooks (28 September 2012). The Process of Parenting: Ninth Edition. McGraw-Hill Higher Education.