

Dynamics of Culture and Status of Gujjar Women in Haryana

Abstract

The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence. There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness."

(Swami Vivekananda)

Gujjar women belong to a community where women play a crucial role but still they do not have much standing when we see a larger picture. There is limited or no exposure to the outside world due to lack of education and cultural implications. These women are prone to dual backwardness one is due to them being from a backward class community and the other due to our basic patriarchal system which keeps women at a subordinate position. Based on the narratives from some people who belong to this community and by the informal interaction with Gujjar women, it can be inferred that Gujjar women though respected in family and participate in the family work in whatever way required, still are not permitted to move out and work. The decision making powers are still in the hands of the males even in matters of spending their own income. Illiteracy prevails in this community, now people have started sending their children to schools but they are themselves illiterate. Work is being done by them and government to uplift the community but women at large still face many challenges which lead to backwardness. Culture plays a crucial role in making them accept their status guided by men and society. This paper will try to explore the impact of culture on lives of Gujjar women in Haryana

Keywords: Gujjar women, Status of Women, Culture.

Introduction

The role and status of women is a talked about topic from decades in India and the world. A section of women, who are educated, urban are conscious of the inequalities and bias they suffer are fighting for their rights. They have established the fact that how women are powerful "resource" to build a family, society and Nation. But the way patriarchal society sees them has not changed much especially in the case of rural unpolished women. Lack of Exposure and sense of self plays a crucial role in their exploitation. Women have so very well adapted themselves to a secondary role particularly in Indian rural societies. The situation becomes clear when we reach out to women from backward classes who are confined to homes and their only identity remains where they are married, not education, not qualities but only family and husband.

Understanding and Rejuvenating Status of Women in India is a great task which requires women's participation at every level but women mostly stays out of the picture which degrades their status. Primarily we have to know about current status of women by going through various aspects of life of an Indian woman. It is generally considered that status refers to a position in society in relation to others and is explained by two basic, ascribed status, which is fixed at the time of birth like gender, caste, religion and aristocracy and achieved status is based on the individual's merit and achievement. Gender inequality is one of the major forms of social inequality and exists all over the world, with different effects in different regions. These differences are primarily due to cultural variations, historical development, geographic location, and, last but not least, the religious norms which are prevalent in a particular society (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Religion plays a vital role in the cultural life of different spaces. It is deeply rooted in people's experiences and influences the socioeconomic and political direction of societies (Stump, 2008). On a similar note, Peach (2006) asserts that for social geographic investigation, religion may now be a more important variable than race or ethnicity.

Monica Munjial Singh

Chairperson & Associate Professor,
Centre for Social Work,
Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India

Puneeta Behl

Research Scholar,
Centre for Social Work,
Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India

National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001 works to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women in every sphere whether social, economic and legal. It gave a special focus to the ninth five year plan. It stresses that mainstreaming women requires making rights of women accessible to them as it will make them empowered and will lead to social transformation. This requires reaching out to women groups and working for their empowerment. So we can say that Gujjar women forms one such community who have still not entered the mainstream and the reason should be sought as it is required to empower them after understanding them in totality.

Aim of the Study

To explore the lives of Gujjar Women whose lives are dictated by traditional norms and values and face dual backwardness because of their belonging to a backward class community and patriarchal structure that rules the community. It will also take into account how social work intervention can help them develop in totality.

Women and Cultural Dynamics

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Both men and women live in and form communication patterns in this complex web of social relationships that constitute society. The society can be defined as the relationship between different castes and classes in different capacities, according to feminist sociological approach. These caste class and gender differences are correlated and leads to social stratification that is difference, inequality, domination. The inter-relationship between class, caste, gender and patriarchy should be properly analysed to open doors to empowerment and equality. (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993). The importance of culture has been interwoven in the minds of Indian women since childhood. There are norms laid down for women to establish them as good or not up to the mark. Women have become flag bearers of respect and honour of their family. Women are conditioned to behave a certain way and haven't given the liberty of thinking and deciding for themselves even if it's about dressing up.

We have come a long way since independence as regards the position of women, but still women are not having complete hold over their lives as compared to men. In today's Indian society we are still following the traditional mind-sets far as women are concerned. There exists two different code of conduct for men and women. Women have been assigned the recessive, self-deprecating role and on the other hand man is considered to be supreme in every sphere. This shapes personality and attitude of women which makes them believe that are dependent on her father, husband and sons respectively at different stages of life for almost everything ; their lives are limited to taking care of children, husband and other family members. So we are still not being able to achieve women empowerment and gender equality which holds back India's development.

Women Empowerment is one of the major agenda of Indian government. According to UN population information Network, empowerment has five components: sense of self-worth, right over choices, right to access of resources and opportunities, right to control over their lives both within and outside home, and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order nationally and internationally. The *Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)* which measure women's and men's ability to participate actively in economic and political life and their command over economic resources. The facts and figures show that there exists the gender inequality which is a hindrance in way of women empowerment. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process which helps people to gain control over their lives. It is used by many disciplines but it can be perceived differently as per this context. Ojha in her article explains empowerment as recognizing ones self-esteem, self-reliance and self-confidence. We can say that if a women is empowered therefore she will have a higher status in society given a fact she understands and accepts her dignity and self-respect, which is also one of the core value of social work profession. Munjial in her article talks about the rights of women of minority groups. Though they have constitutional provisions but these communities are ruled by personal sentiments of community which are generally biased towards women. Author suggests that a new approach based on faith and customary religious laws that uphold basic human values are needed to end exploitation of women. Gujjar women also face cultural barrier and their progress depends upon how we come up hand in hand with traditions and modernization.

Gender Inequality refers to unequal social and economic rewards between genders for the same work. It also takes into account the tasks assigned, power, prestige a person holds by virtue of being from a particular sex. The preconceived notions about males and females in our traditional society give birth to the inequalities which has made its place in every aspect of women's life. The differences have been made right from the time of birth of a girl, in regards providing them education, making them economically independent, getting them married. In maximum Indian houses, the decision making is done by the males in the family. This is a culturally constructed as nothing can justify unequal rewards to women when they are equal partners in maintaining their households. It is inculcated in her that she needs someone to protect her and she is dependent on that significant male in her life. Her progress depends upon the man in her life and it is important for them to identify with thinking and lifestyle of her partner. Indian women, no matter how much they achieve in life have to fit into their idealized roles set by society, so it cannot be said that their status has empowered them completely. Now realising the current mind-set of people for women, it is important to discuss women status again, as a woman earning equally to their male counterpart, educated and empowered has to fulfil these social versions of wife, daughters, and

daughter-in-laws according to society's criterion; then where do women from minorities with less exposure, education stand in today's globalized world. It is time to understand the situation of women who are backward not only as a caste but educationally and economically.

Being a Gujjar women

Gujjar women belong to a community where women play a crucial role but still they don't have much standing when we see a larger picture. There is limited or no exposure to outside world due to lack of education. These women are prone to dual backwardness one is due to being from a backward class community and the other due to our basic patriarchal system which keeps women at a subordinate position. Based on narratives from some people who belong to this community and by informal interaction with Gujjar women, it can be inferred that Gujjar women though respected in family and participate in the family work in whatever way required, still are not permitted to move out and work. The decision making powers are still in the hands of male even in matters of spending their own income. Illiteracy prevails in this community, now people have started sending their children to schools but they are themselves illiterate. Work is being done by them and government to uplift the community but women at large still face many challenges which lead to backwardness.

What makes these studies important is that it is need of the hour to explore the lives of these women as when we talk about women development in this globalised era we have to take into account each and every category of women which are placed due to implications of culture and society. As the debate about a future global development agenda to succeed the in Millennium Development Goals in 2015, there is a broad agreement that gender equality and women's empowerment are crucial components and in India we are still struggling to mainstream our women who live in backwardness. Development can only happen if we analyse these smaller groups, access their needs and plan intervention. We have to work at the grass root level then only the bigger picture can be change. These kind of ethnographic studies are required This study will be a useful document accounting Gujjar population and their socio-economic dimension as there is dearth of work on them in this particular area. This piece of work will be a ready reference for future studies or any work for development of this community. This paper is based on primary data as per narratives, group discussions done during the extensive field work. Based on the information collected there are few Inferences:

1. Gujjar women are culturally sensitive women and holds highest regard for their community.
2. Gujjar women with good financial background and educated family have different and relaxed environment for them which is different from people with average background.
3. Gujjar women accept the fact that outspoken and opinionated women are not accepted at large. People think they are not good for family and reputation. Girls are considered good if they

adhere to whatever they are required to do e.g. even if they are highly educated they can't decide on their own to work or to stay at home.

4. Education is not a prime necessity for them. Educated Gujjar women have been married to much less educated men based on land they hold. This creates difference in understanding levels especially in young couples. Highly educated Gujjar girls don't get good matches so they get married to younger man with good financial background.
5. Dowry system is proudly flaunted by community as part of status symbol and gift to daughter. After this daughter has no right over the property of father and if she legally wants it family breaks all the ties with daughter.
6. Gujjar Women educated or uneducated have tremendous pride and love for their Community. No doubt that the young women wants to work and accept modernity but keeping in mind their cultural sentiment. The concept of self-worth and independence for them is recognition of their work by in-laws and husband. If their husband takes them out and permits them to not wear ghoongat/ veil makes them feel empowered. But the major part of seeking permission for everything they do is not recognised as lack of decision making by them.
7. They openly condemn inter-caste and inter-religion marriage. Some have said things like "Celebrities opting inter- caste and inter-religion, arranged will lead to mixed genes and will affect their generations to come" and " Education doesn't mean that we dilute our culture by marrying people for other caste" which strengthens institutions like khap panchayats which is violation of human rights.
8. No matter how educated they are, they cannot identify the problems hampering their society because of not accepting few required changes. They are very well conditioned that they have been given education, allowed to go easy with ghoongat/ veil is their empowerment. Their logical thinking does not take them to the point where they can recognise the lack of decision making in their lives.
9. If few villages in Yamunanagar, women do not roam in villages, visit neighbours and don't even go out to buy their basic utility material. Limiting them to home and giving them material necessities equals to good life and empowerment for them. Young women do find it burdensome but do it for happiness and respect of family. It is an observed fact that these women who accept themselves to be empowered because they get whatever they want is due to patriarchal mindset.
10. Totkas/ black magic still prevail in the community even practiced by educated people. They opt for traditional ways, gods man advices more than medical practitioners even if loosing on their health. Majority of women follow any guru and consider it important to identify right and wrong.
11. Few people who have opted for urban lifestyle and are financially stable have opted for certain

changes in traditional systems but follow their rituals and tradition religiously and consider their customs and traditions their unique identity.

12. Son preference exists in the community.
13. Gujjars identify themselves with clan of lord Krishna and worship animals, they are strictly vegetarians.
14. Majority of Gujjar household have cows and buffalo and major part of their occupation is dairy. Women are key players in rearing animals, talking out milk, bathing them, feeding them. Men have the responsibility of selling the milk. But the recognition that women are key players in the income generation is negligible. Whatever part women play is considered their duty. This is the main problem with women. They don't recognise the work they do for their family should be respected.

The main point here is that nobody can achieve women empowerment if they don't realize the need and importance of getting hold of ones decisions. Progress in totality can be made if society treats everyone equal regardless of gender, caste, race, religion. People can only be changed via proper education and sensitization which is a gradual process. We cannot treat women as homogeneous group and need to recognise their vulnerabilities from their perspective and making them understand importance of self-confidence and love. Because without empowering women a society cannot progress.

Limitations

1. It is difficult to establish a rapport with the family to strike a conversation with women Man of the house is extremely guarded about the conversations, Even if researcher is a female.
2. Community is highly sensitive pertaining to their thought processes and rituals

Social Work Intervention

The Preamble of NASW code of ethics has a primary mission to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of everyone, with a particular attention to the needs and empowerment of the people who are vulnerable oppressed and lining in poverty. Social work has a value system of service, social justice, dignity and worth of an individual, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence. It makes a social work profession to accept an individual working for betterment of an individual and also maintain the dignity of that person. Social work is a practise profession which bridges the gap between needy and resources. So it can be of great help for Gujjar women for their empowerment which comes under primary mission of social work practice which is to make people realize their worth and develop their full potential, enrich their lives and prevent dysfunctioning with basic principles of human rights and social justice.

Feminist social work theory and the concept of empowerment has their focus on domination and subordination. Poorman (2003), Ally & Bacon 'specifically examine role expectations and status and power differences related to gender while empowerment theory looks more specifically at the

role of race/ethnicity/culture and, to some extent, class status in shaping individuals and problems'. In addition, feminist social workers were among the first to recognize that empowerment must be anchored within women's own experiences (Carr, 2003 Social Work Practioners have been discussing as to whether to consider empowerment a theory or a process (Carr, 2003 Carr E. S. (2003). Most believe it is a process that begins by recognizing the nature of the oppression one is experiencing followed by an increase in awareness and consciousness—and for some, personal and/or familial/community transformation (Gutierrez, 1990 Gutierrez L.M. (1990). The empowerment approach to social work practice, believes it is neither a theory nor a model of practice but a 'variety of conceptually coherent social work approaches and frameworks for practice'. Empowerment is best viewed as a theoretical framework which helps people take more control over their lives (AlMaseb & Julia, 2007 AlMasebH. & JuliaM. (2007)

Like the concept of empowerment, feminist analysis helps women to understand how they are oppressed and dominated and often inspires them to engage in efforts to bring about broader social change. Feminist scholars, educators and social workers encourage women to reclaim power to the extent possible in our society, express anger and build self-confidence and self-efficacy.

After discussing the status of women in India and Government action, the question here is why women are still not empowered in our country. Government is working hard in this regard through various policies and programmes but it is not reaching out the way it is supposed to. Now the non-governmental sector is also intervening to implement programmes where the role of social work intervention is playing a vital role. Women have to recognize and believe in their capability which is one of the core value of social work which is dignity and worth of an individual. Social work is a helping profession with a major goal to improve the society's overall well-being, especially for the most vulnerable populations. It has a code of ethics with some ethical values and principles which are to be followed while the intervention process. Social work practice is also strengths-based. Social workers help people or groups identify their problems, determine their skills and capacities, what they are doing well, and how that was accomplished, and then analyse ways that those strengths might be applied to the identified problems. The code of ethics of National Association of Social Workers recognises the importance of cultural competence and social diversity as a must to plan social work intervention. It recognises the importance of understanding that people belong to different ethnicity, nations, race, sex which make them diverse.

Feminist Social Work provides a method that is helping in service provision and delivery to enhance well-being. Feminist principles relevant to practice and evident in feminist social work are which stresses of women as an important part of community and lays some basic principles for working with women which are. Some of these principles are Recognising the

diversity of women; Valuing women's strengths; Eliminating the privileging of certain groups of women to prevent difference from becoming a basis for unequal power relations between different groups of women; Considering women as active agents capable of making decisions for themselves in all aspects of their lives; Locating individual women in their social situations and acknowledging the interconnections between the individual and collective entities relevant to them; Providing women with the space to voice their own needs and solutions to problems; Acknowledging that the principle 'the personal is political' is relevant at macro, meso and micro levels of practice; Redefining private woes as public issues; Ensuring that women's needs are addressed within the context of their being seen as whole human beings in which each area of life interacts with the others; Recognising the interdependent nature of human relations and through that, realising that what happens to one individual or group has implications for everyone else; Recognising that women's individual problems have social causes and addressing both levels in each intervention; and Looking for collective solutions to individual problems (Dominelli, 1991). So it can be concluded that working with women from a feminist empowerment approach, helps them to gain control over their environment, develop self-esteem and self-efficacy and adopt new, positive behaviours. Feminist and empowerment theories and practice teach us that our clients can claim power, build self-confidence and engage in mutual relationships. Those skills help empower all of us to realize our passion as we strive for a humane and just world.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said based on the field experience that Gujjar Women have not recognised their place and rights and potential. They are still guarded by their men in the name of safety and respect and this conditional have barred them to fully explore and exploit their potential. Cultural and customary influences are so strong which hampers the process of rational thinking and progress. Bit being a human resource such communities should be focal point where a logical shift is required for enhancement of potential and progress. This kind of ethnographic studies are important at the micro level so that problems can be indentified at all levels and interventions can be planned.

References

- Anthias, Floya and Nira Yuval-Davis. 1993. Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Culture, Class and Anti-racist Struggle. London: Routledge.*
- Banerjee, Diptendra, ed. 1985. Marxian Theory and the Third World. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.*
- Bardhan, Kalpana. 1985. 'Women's Work, Welfare and Status: Forces of Tradition and*
- Chang Freire, 1998 FreireP. (1998) 'The adult literacy process as cultural action for Freedom', Harvard Educational Review, vol. 68, no. 4, pp. 480-518.*
- Hipilito-Delgado, Carlos P. & LeeCourtland (2007) 'Empowerment theory for the professional school counselor: a manifesto for what really matters', Professional School Counseling, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 327-332.e in India.' Economic and Political Weekly 20 (51): 2261-67t of these*
- Kamra, S. (2004).Sociology: Social Stratification. Dept. of Correspondence, Punjab University, Chandigarh.*
- Karlsson, B.G. et.al. (2006). Indigeneity in India. Kegan Paul Ltd. Publication.*
- <https://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp23/7/2014,7:04pm>*
- ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/23/7/20142:25pmstructures.*
- Ojha, Radha. (2010). Lohia and Empowerment of Women. Mainstream, Vol. XLVIII, No 13, March 20.*
- Prasad, Kiran. (2006). Women in Rural Development, Contemporary Social Policy and Practice. Delhi: The Women Press.*
- Rathod, Nikamet al. (2011). Participation of Rural Women in Dairy Farming in Karnataka. Indian research Journal Extension Education, Page 31*
- Relichet, Elizabeth. (2003). Social Work and Human rights: A foundation for Policy and Practice. Jaipur: Rawat Publication.*
- Role of Women in Informal Sector in India. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (JHSS).*
- Sangvi, K and Chakarvati. (Ed.). (1999). Desperate Women: Transitory Contexts, Persistence Structures. New Delhi: Manohar Publisher*
- <https://www.poverties.org/blog/status-of-women-in-india>*