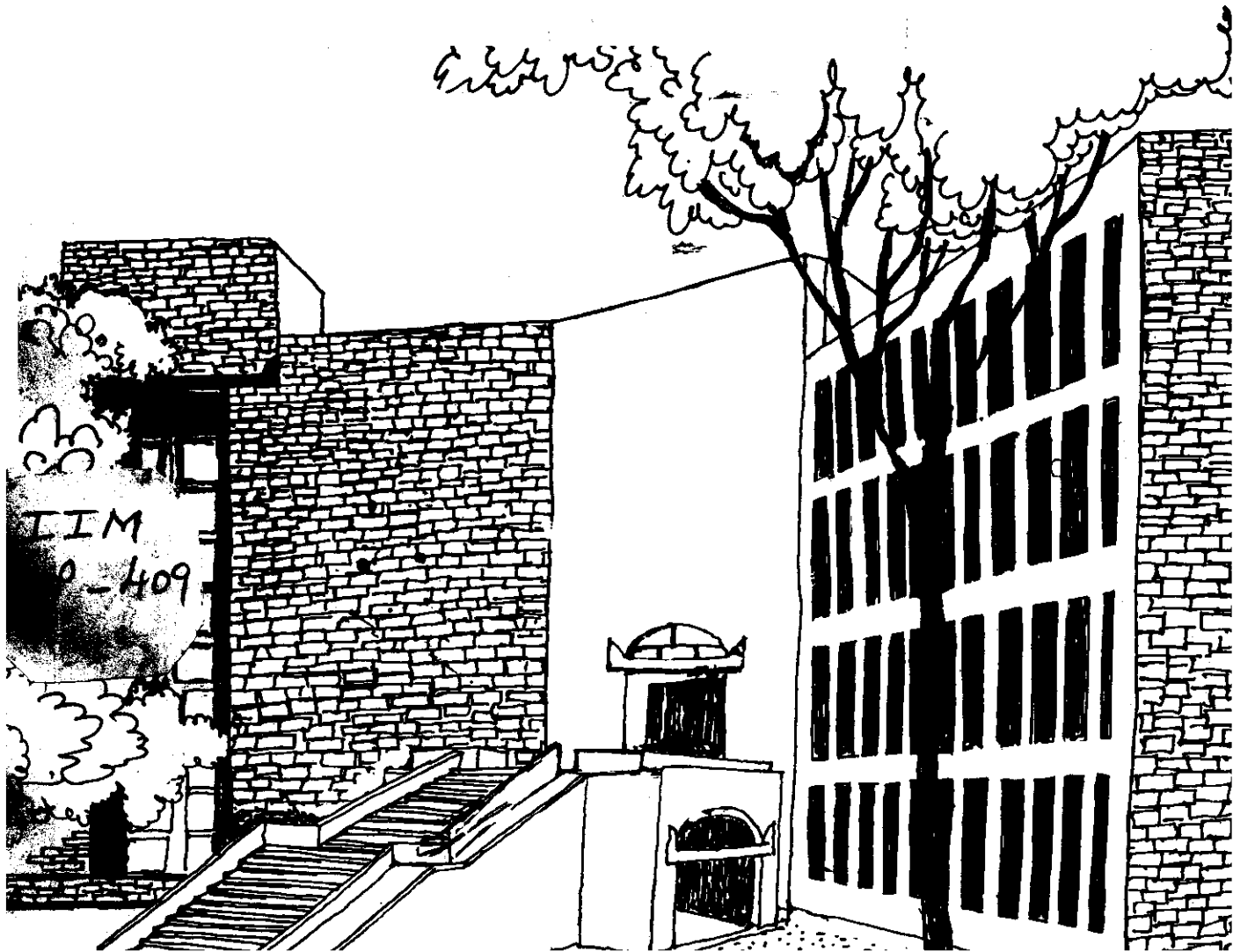




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MODELS OF ROLE IDENTITY IN INDIAN
WOMEN BARRIERS TO GROWTH

By

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MODELS OF ROLE IDENTITY IN INDIAN WOMEN
BARRIERS TO GROWTH

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I acknowledge my deep appreciation to my colleague, Professor Pulin K. Garg who helped me to explore issues of my own role and personal identity.

During this process we have been working together on issues of role and identity of both men and women in Indian society. This article reports part of this joint venture.

Models of Role Identity in Indian Women

Barriers to Growth

Abstract

The paper is based on the ten years of experience of the author and her colleague professor Pulin K. Garg with women students, career women, professionals and housewives. The paper explores the dynamics of 'being' and 'becoming' of Indian women. The women experienced their 'being' mortgaged to the traditional culture and prescriptive roles and their 'becoming' to the emerging modern aspirations. Each step the women take to come to terms confronts her with a choice - the choice of branching out on her own or to postpone her dreams and aspirations for the role security of home and husband, the choice of enduring and persistent involvement in her career, life and meaning or to engage in transient activities to save herself from boredom and apathy.

Women who are attempting to create space for themselves and redefinition of their roles are confronted with fears of social stigma, isolation and loneliness. Their search for personhood gets them caught in the pulls and pushes of fragmented and narrow roles and the vicious grasp of the neurotic role processes of the Indian

social system. It sucks them deeper in resolving inter personal relationship in their social and work setting.

The role models both social and spiritual which are available provide only partial anchors. These models are either confronting, reacting or side stepping the system without modifying it. These role models only attempt to transcend the social system but fail to generate new processes of role change within the social system. It seems that the only alternative available to Indian women is to discover their psychological resources to trust themselves to create a path, and like heroes tread the path which has not been travelled before. Women in search for existential meaning for themselves can only learn to make choices and not compromises and pay the price of the choices without blaming or bitterness.

Models of Role Identity in Indian Women
Barriers to Growth

Indira J. Parikh

This is a dialogue my colleague* and I had with Janaki a young graduate from the management education.

"I am going to be married. My fiance and I had a long chat about our future. He said to me that he owes a great deal to his father who has made many sacrifices to give opportunities for my growth. So when we are married my father will have first claims on my earnings. We will live on your earnings. This will be for a while. When my children are born you will stop working because I do not believe in my children being brought up by aayas. And since you may feel stagnation sitting at home, your role will be to read the latest journals in management and keep me up to date on current issues. I will be very busy in my job and will have very little time for such an effort".

* Over the last 10 years Professor Pulin K. Garg (Organization Behaviour, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad) and I have worked with women students, managers, other professional career women and housewives.

She came to us quite confused, hurt and angry. She felt that her wings were being clipped. We asked her What do you expect in marriage? She had dreams of togetherness, of creating a home and sharing in each others roles. She expected encouragement for her aspirations and for her dreams of a career. Above all she sought an experience of love and affection. Our insistence that she articulate to her fiance what she dreamt brought only tears. Our suggestion that she be assertive and help the fiance to understand her dreams brought to surface fragility of relationship but intensity of love. Similarly our attempts to help her explore marriage as an act of love and marriage as a context of social and psychological existence made her only weep. Of course giving herself time and opportunity to discover alternate relationship before deciding on marriage brought protests. Eventually she married him without any specific resolution of her issues.

Janaki's is not the only case. In last 10 years working with both young men and women, repeatedly brought into focus women's feelings of helplessness, victimhood, of being stifled, dilemma of living for self or others and having no space for one's own being. The 'being' of the women was mortgaged to the traditional culture, and her 'becoming' was mortgaged to the wishes of the husband and modern aspirations.

Janaki came from a family which was anchored in traditional values. Being an obedient daughter, a good wife, an ideal daughter-in-law and producer of an heir to carry the heritage were the role horizons set for her. However, in the emergent tradition of the new era she was sent to higher education as the source of security in the future. The educational system provided a new horizon and acted as a cauldron of opportunities to dream and aspire for a career in the world of work. Janaki did well in school and by effort and hard work she also managed to do academically well in the university. With persistence logical reasoning she persuaded her parents to let her come away from home to acquire management education at Ahmedabad.

The new setting where she was away from home and could make her own decision gave her a new experience of life. She felt as free as a bird, she could fly high and travel vast distances in thought and feeling. Gradually from a hesitant tentative and shy girl she blossomed into a confident, aspiring and dreaming woman. And lo and behold! She was in love. The wedding bells were ringing. At this point of time she had the above talk with her intended - a management graduate himself.

Our studies with women during their education phase, and later in marriage suggests that Janaki is a dominant prototype of Indian women today. She is torn between the deep emotional roots of idealised woman's role of traditional culture and of growing awareness of the life beyond those horizons made available by education. In this intra-personal conflict she wrestles with immobility, sense of sacrifice victimhood, resentment and anger on the one hand and assertiveness, righteousness and guilt on the other hand. Each step confronts her with a choice - the choice of branching out on her own or to postpone all her dreams and aspirations for an idea of home and husband. Each step confronts her with the choice of an enduring and persistent involvement in her career, life and meaning or choosing to carve a transient, activity to save herself from boredom and apathy. Chances are that the second is the frequent choice by majority of Indian women. Very few women of educated middle class seem to choose to carve a life in accordance of their socio-psychological potentials.

Before we attribute these experiences into a personal dilemmas of women to Indian culture and its values let us examine some of the contextual factors that seem to operate behind these dilemmas.

Bio-physiological differentiation which sets men and women apart as counter yet complimentary points for continuing life of the species seemed to have been capitalised by the agrarian culture to design differential roles and linking of these roles to distinct patterns of role activities. Furthermore, the role differentiation has been justified on the basis of bio-physiological logic. Agrarian society then set about to reinforce these differences. Over a period of time the classification and patterning of role activities acquired an absolutism for conduct as well as visualising of the role by individuals. There is evidence in history that among the nomads and the cattle culture people, such strict demarcation and patterning of activities by bio-sexual identity did not exist.

What is this role that women were relegated by this process of agrarian society and its culture? At the very primary level women became the recipients and nutrients of life. Socially, they were relegated to carry the burden of nurturing, maintaining and perpetuating the structurally desirable aspect of cultural pathos and the social custom. Women, thus got identified with home, security, stability and continuity. They also became the symbols of providing nurturance by being the context of men's vision of life.

Somewhere through the decadence of the Indian agrarian society this role deteriorated into a dependent and captive worker for the men-folk. Historically, and over time this led to

patterns of subjugation and secondary status. It created myths of fragility and helplessness of women who needed to be protected from themselves and others. Thus women get reduced to the property set and hence open to exploitation.

It seems that women too have internalised the agrarian model crystalized by **Manu** - women are to be the property owned and protected by a successive set of males - father, brother, husband and sons. At no point of time women receive the message that they are human beings who can be autonomous, can make choices for themselves, create a life style of their own and work from their own identity. They at best could adjust, adapt and accommodate themselves. They had no privilege to redefine their situation through active role. They were expected to sacrifice, suffer and through patience create a context for the well being of the family.

In the context of rising aspirations in women through education and changing ethos of mankind it is very easy to raise, the cry of 'male chauvinism' and put all the blame on men and society. It is also easy to glorify the suffering, strength and forbearance of women. It is easy to buy the metaphor of making women into martyrs, the trampled race and the persecuted. In fact this seems to be the current fashion. The real issue however, is of women's struggle to achieve a status of person in society. In the moment a women begins this struggle she gets confronted with issues of equality, respect and autonomy,

Similarly experiences which have simmered in the slow fire of culture viz., discriminations, denials, deprivations and rejection come to the forefront. These are facts of social interaction. Are they the real issues?

To me, it seems that focussing on the social interactional issues is leading the women's struggle of become a person into dysfunctional confrontation with the society. Frightened of the real confrontation many women deny themselves their legitimate space and ignore their vast resources and immense potentials. Caught in this dynamics women get entrenched into demanding from the society and male counterparts bestowal of equality, their legitimate space in organizations from significant others and acknowledgement of their competence, skills and capabilities in work settings. All they, then, end up receiving is patronage, meagre resources, inadequate infra-structural support and experiencing non-inclusion. In effect being marginals in any given system.

The critical issue seems to be whether society itself wants to continue to disown the vast human resources of half of its population? Does it want to remain caught and entrenched in the agrarian frames of looking at roles of men and women? In my opinion the mobilisation of these human resources need not be competing, conflicting and or confronting male resources.

Professional women who have attempted to work with their potentials, capabilities and resources and have entered the world

of occupation and career get caught with the pathos of traditional past and ethos of modern times. They accept the responsibilities and expectations of both the past and the present, thus getting overburdened. This leaves them very little scope to disengage themselves from the pulls and pushes of dependence, surrender and control and generate for themselves processes of autonomy and commitment.

As a result such women are continuously struggling in the system to find freedom from dependent and controlling relationships, to redefine their status from being passive performers and being acted upon by the system, to being actors and acting upon the system for its own well being. Economic independence is only a mask to avoid confrontation with the basic issues of becoming a person in social interaction. Many a women in their struggle become victims of the fear of social stigma, isolation and loneliness and run from pillar to post searching for one relationships or one experience which would free from the dehumanisation they have lived with.

A shift to urban industrial mode of social existence has further confounded this struggle of women. In the traditional agrarian society women lived and worked in groups and thus had the support of the social system to experience some kind of personhood in their own sex groups. Today women live alone and work in mixed groups. This has denied them any setting and space to experience personhood. Women after women in career and profession find themselves caught in creating a

social system for personhood, but they eventually end up seeking an anchor outside of themselves in relationships. Many successful women get linked to senior males as their patron. Their success is then seen only as an extension rather than a product of their own assets and potentials.

It seems that both men and women in modern society have failed to delink the absolutism of role activities associated with that of being male and female. More specifically women get caught in their primary biological role of nurturance and sustenance. They find it difficult to assert and create a life style in harmony of their potentials and need to be together in marriage. This is reinforced by the social structure which egoligises passivity and withdrawal into mother and wife's role. Women find it difficult to accept their own positive assertiveness in the process of 'becoming'. Unable to accept their femininity as a positive strength the women confuse it with their womenhood and sexuality and turn themselves into object of consumption, aggression and psychological brutalisation by male counterparts. Society provides no space for sorting this out.

In our research we have found that most women seem to work from one of the three significant social models available from history. One model is of Rani Padmini. Loyalty to the role of being an ideal woman of the husband's family, and using herself as a resource for the dominant male are her chief

characteristics. This model is a continuation of myths of Seetha and Savitri. They become the holders of the virtue and follow the commands of the prescriptive society. Death is their choice for preservation of their role and their dominant dignity and identity as a person.

This model is internalised by many a woman of today. Innumerable suicides by burning, or passive acceptance of being annihilated are examples of women who in sheer desperation choose death than constant indignity and brutalization.

The second model of women ^{is that of} Rani of Jhansi. She inspired by ideals of autonomy and freedom asserted to transcend the role of being perceived as an object, helpless, and fragile. She took up arms against the unjust system bent on victimisation of the weak and the helpless. She ~~took~~ took up arms to fight and assert and in the process got killed. This model is internalised by a whole set of women who create voluntary social organizations, enter into social work but eventually initiate no basic changes in the processes of the social system. They get lost in the wilderness of mammoth traditions and end up doing patch work. The contributions of these women remain an insignificant memory of their heroic struggle for the downtrodden.

The third dominant model which is available to Indian women is that of Meerabai. Meerabai, disillusioned and disenchanted by the nature of relationships turns to spirituality. Her choice of disengaging herself from the social system and absorbing herself into her own devotion brings her accusations, trials and tribulations, which ultimately brings her death. In today's context women who have exhausted their roles of daughters, daughter-in-law, wife and mother turn to religion for renewing their source of meaning and existence. In the modern urban setting movements like Acharya Rajneesh and Hare Krishna are attracting vast number of women to this model even at a younger age.

All these three models have commonalities. All of them are either confronting, reacting or side-stepping the system without confronting it directly and modifying it. Death is another such commonality. 'Death' either physical or psychological. These women become the unsung martyrs who unintentionally perpetuate the dehumanised social system.

All three models attempt to transcend the social roles but fail to create real space for themselves in the social system. They attempted to define new roles but fail to generate new processes of role change within the system.

There are a number of other models available in the myths, folklore, folktales, and epics. There are models which are of religious nature, Durga, Kali, Chandi to name a few. All these models provide an insight into the unexplored areas of self in women. Most of these models however, fragment the multiple and simultaneous psychological aspects of the women. Either the virtues of social roles are glorified or the spiritual autonomy is defied. In rare cases ideals are acted upon. But none provide a model for women to integrate their process of 'being' and 'becoming' to generate a socio-psychological identity for themselves in the system.

Historically speaking the Indian society has allowed one such role—that of a courtesan. The courtesan acquired a high position in the society. Her occupation demanded that she be well versed in arts, music, literature and politics. The profession demanded strict rules of conduct and honour and this role was viewed with some awe and dignity. The courtesan was assertive, articulate of her knowledge, accepted her femininity, made commitment by choice and commanded respect for herself.

However, the acceptance of this role by the society in its dignified aspect was short lived. The process of the social system turned this role into an object of consumption and all the accomplishments as an added asset to the glorification of the sexual skill and expertise. What was once a role which demanded years of rigorous training deteriorated into vulgarity.

Some of the successful women in India are very often ^{compared with} / this courtesan identity.

Today's career women are caught in the pulls and pushes of fragmented and narrow roles. Opportunities of education, discovering their intelligence and abilities, encouragement to learn the art of music and dance and to actively participate in the world of work along side their male counter-parts opens a whole new horizon for them. However, the social and psychological stigma attached to such an active role taking leaves women vulnerable in their role of women. The social system has lost its tenacity and objectives to help women acquire a positive and graceful integration of their femininity, womanhood and their personhood. Women caught in the evaluation of themselves, and a hankering search for their acceptance get caught with the superficial acceptance and recognition of their women qualities and lose their person capabilities. Majority of the career and professional women get stuck in the dilemmas of women-person encounters. Each attempt to get out sucks them deeper into resolving inter-personal relationships of their social and work roles. With each attempt they are sucked in further in the vicious grasp of the neurotic role processes of the social and work organizations of the society.

The question at this cross-roads is whether there any alternatives for women to define a new role for themselves? Are there any models available in our society to facilitate such a

new role? The answer to the first question is 'yes' but to the second question the answer is 'No'. In today's times one charismatic woman cannot generate an ideal model which other women can follow. This kind of a leader-follower model would only repeat the historical process of turning others into echoes and shadows of a giant model. Women will only turn out pale replicas, celluloid and plaster of paris copies of others. The only alternative seems to be that women become 'heroes' or 'heroines' in themselves to initiate a search to discover their own identity.

Some of the women who feel they have been able to integrate in themselves their woman - person role in both social and work setting identify their psychological resources as an asset is the ability to trust themselves, ability to walk alone and the courage to choose a path which has not been travelled before. In each critical moment they have made choices and not compromises. They have accepted the intended and unintended consequences of their choices without bitterness.

These women have had the courage to come to a cross-road. Like heroes of past in search of their existential identity, these women have time and again asked this question to the old witch spinning a wheel at the cross-road - Which road do I take?

She gives this answer. 'One is a road to the right. This road will take six months. It is a widely travelled road, has familiar landmarks has many a travellers as companions and shelters for rest and food along the way. It is an easy road and a road of little effort. A known and familiar road which has existed for ages. It has a history and a tradition. The other road is the road to the left. It is a road with many a dangers. It is filled with unknown paths, barriers of turbulent rivers, deserts and high mountains. Very few people dare enter that way. There is no road. You will have to create and make a path. There are no landmarks and no shelter. The road takes a year or more and is a lonely road. 'CHOOSE'.

Indian women at this juncture get caught with the choice of the familiar road with the landmarks of Sati, Seeta and Savitri. They get caught in the iron grasp of the social system which demands a price of surrender of their existential beings to acquire a role based security. However some women have opted for the road to the left to create a landmark for themselves. They have had the courage and convictions to choose the road to adventure, to discover the vicissitudes of their existence and to grapple to discover an integrated identity which includes the multiple facets of social and work roles. They have owned up their existential and psychological identity beyond the social roles. Only then fulfillment and wider horizons have been experienced, acted upon and actualized.