

Social Conditioning in India: the past and present, what of the future?

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to discuss the impact of social conditioning on the mental health of young adults and children in India. Social Conditioning has at its core the role of stereotypes in conditioning humans to behave in such and such a way. Positive and negative reinforcements of society's condition, encourage and train people to think and act in a certain way. It starts at birth, and several factors such as family, physical and social environment, biology, social experiences and so on create certain social conditioning. This issue is of importance in the present day as the factors that promote social conditioning have varied in the last 75 years of Indian Independence with unprecedented technological changes that individuals have been encountering, the media and social networks occupying significant major roles in the lives of people. Statistics show that Mental health issues and the number of suicides per year are increasing steadily in India. Several research studies point out that a major causal factor leading to suicide is the failure to meet expectations. The role of social conditioning on the maladaptive behaviour of individuals taking a heavy toll on their lives appears to be critically important. In this context, the paper discusses the scenario of social conditioning in India based on the secondary sources collected from research sites such as research gate, Google scholar, Academia.edu etc. The study proposes, the need of the hour is psychological intervention at early ages to have a society with mentally healthy individuals.

Keywords : Social Conditioning, Women, Societal Practices, Social Acceptance

I. INTRODUCTION

Social acceptance is the driving force behind many decisions that people make. It is remarkable to see that even after centuries, the desire of people to be accepted by society has not changed. Rather it is the fear and pain of rejection that has people striving for acceptance as acceptance results in better physical

fitness, biopsychological advantages and emotional development (Leary 2022). Society often prescribes roles to an individual based on their age and gender, the effects of which are predominantly observed among adolescents and young adults as they have set expectations to meet (Hill & Lynch 1983). Wadsworth (1971) calls systematic manipulation of reinforcing and aversive stimuli to increase the probability of socially functional behaviour as social conditioning.

The present paper seeks to illuminate the issue that though the times have changed drastically and women are the forerunners in almost all facets, social conditioning has not changed. To illustrate this point, two case studies are analyzed. The first is regarding the performance of *sati* by the widow of Late Brigadier Zabbar Singh, Comptroller of the Jodhpur Maharaja's household – on October 23 1954 and the second one pertains to a much more recent event of 2011, the case of Chavva Manisha, 16, and Malepati Nandini, 16. The two cases are taken based on the time gap between occurrences just to emphasise that though years have passed the impact of social conditioning on human behaviour has not changed much.

The case of the widow of the Late Brigadier Zabbar Singh as mentioned is an incident which took place right after the Indian Independence. The last case of *sati* however, occurred in 1986. Why was the ceremony so important to these women? Is it the desire of being known as the ideal wife? Or is it the pressure of society? Though the answer cannot be determined, we cannot deny the role that social conditioning plays. In this case of *sati*, where the widow willingly sacrificed her life by burning in the funeral pyre of her husband to prove her devotion and chastity. The *sati* also ensures that the widow's mother's, father's and husband's families are glorified and honoured through this decision (Thakur 1963).

The second is a case, of two girls committing suicide in a corporate college. It is selected because India is home to the largest number of adolescents in the world, comprising about a fifth of its population (243 million) (Malhotra, Patra 2014.). It happened in much more recent times as mentioned above, yet, the reason remains the same, social conditioning. The difference that we observe between the two cases is that in the

first it is social conditioning that manifested as an important Indian tradition and in the second case, being socially conditioned, the parents pressurized the children regarding their academic pursuits and achievements. This resulted in the adolescent girls taking drastic measures, the only reason is being unable to meet societal demands.

In today's globalized world, where the internet and media are acting as windows through which one can see the culture, traditions and lifestyles of societies much different from their own, social conditioning has increased. The changing nature of the world and its many judgmental ways puts pressure on children from a young age to behave in a certain way, forcing them to be what they are not. Peer pressure and the need to fit in, to be among the 'in' people is another driving force behind the growing number of suicides. Adolescents feel as if they are forced to be someone they are not, which doesn't give any real meaning to their existence. Socialization is where norms, customs and ideologies of society are reinforced whereas training individuals to respond in a manner generally approved by society and peer groups are called social conditioning. Social conditioning is directly related to the particular culture that one is involved in. Social conditioning is stronger than socialization as it influences the behaviour of the individual; it can manifest in several ways such as social patterns, structure, nationalism, education, employment, popular culture, religion, spirituality and family life.

This paper seeks to emphasize that social conditioning has increased greatly and it is causing undue pressure on the individual and this has to be addressed in the early years of life beginning at the home.

Case Study 1

The (Prevention) of Sati Act was enacted by the Govt. of Rajasthan in 1987 and an Act of the Parliament of India by the enactment of The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1988. The Act was brought into force following the case of Roop Kanwar, who fell prey to the practice at 18 years old, after losing her husband (Kishwar & Vanita 1988). Public outcry in the urban regions shook the country to make laws to stop the heinous act. But, the people of Rajasthan still worship her as a goddess.

In the case of the widow of the Late Brigadier Zabbar Singh, the act was supposed to be done in secret. The woman had prepared herself for the event and willingly stepped on the pyre to join her husband. According to the narrative of Maharani Padmavati Gaekwad of Baroda, her close friend, in 1984, the lady was deeply attached to her husband and her intentions to perform *sati* was known to her immediate family members. However, none of them persuaded her to rethink her decision. The public got to know of the intention of the widow and flocked to the cremation grounds. The funeral pyre is said to have been burning for many months due to the number of coconuts offered on the pyre. The colour of the dress that the widow wore is not worn by others today as it is being worshipped and the woman ceased to be a woman and became a goddess (India's last known case of *sati*: 'She ceased to be a woman... was a Goddess' India News, The Indian Express, 2019). Many such incidents can be found as one seeks to delve into the past. The practice was not only encouraged but also forced upon the women of India by the family members. If any woman escaped or refused to *sati*, the woman and her entire family would be ostracized from society. It took centuries for the practice to finally lose its influence on Indian society.

Case Study 2

In this case, Chavva Manisha, 16, and Malepati Nandini, 16 were students of Junior Intermediate (Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry group), Narayana Junior College located on Pulivendula Road at C.K. Dinne in Kadapa district, Andhra Pradesh, India (India News, The Indian Express, 2015). The police found a note saying that as they were best friends, they decided to end their lives together as they were unable to handle the academic stress. The parents identified the handwriting on the note as their child's, yet, they are not convinced that the suicides are not because of academic pressure and accused the college management of trying to suppress facts and they suspect ragging. The note specifies that the students were unable to bear the Academic Stress, which means that the external pressure put on these students by their parents, friends, classmates and teachers was too much to bear. There was also a rumour that there was a love affair behind the suicides. Though there is no proof of the rumour, even assuming it to be true again brings us back to the point that, external pressure is the reason behind the extreme step.

Analysis of the Two Cases

Social conditioning:

- Ideological pressure – devotion to husband – the sacrifice of one's life
- Devaluation of widowhood
- Social Appreciation for the sacrifice of life
- Obtaining good scores or grades on the examination
- Social prestige
- Achievement orientation
- Bond of friendship
- High expectations of parents from children

Key issues

The important common driving force in both cases of suicide is the motive to please society at large or rather avoid being shunned by society. Society set standards the individual has to reach which if they do not, they are sidelined, ignored or rejected. Another common observation in both cases is gender. Even though we have women's rights and laws and women are at the forefront in many areas, the stress Indian women bear upon them that originate from society is far greater compared to men (Basu, 2012).

Objectives of the study:

- To comprehend the social conditioning of suicides.
- To understand the socio-etiological factors in the mental health issues of Indian adolescents and youth
- To contemplate strategies of intervention for better mental health

Concepts Employed

- Social conditioning: The sociological process of training individuals in a society to respond in a manner that society approves in general and peer groups within society are called social conditioning. It is the instrument which allows for the 'fitting in' of individuals into society.
- Psychological concepts - stress, anxiety and depression among the youth of India.
- Sound Mental Health and Interventions

II. Review of Literature

Though an enormous amount of sociological literature is available on suicide starting from the Classical work

of Emile Durkheim *Le Suicide* (1897) in general and the latest in India about farmers' suicides (Puthenveetil 2006), there is a paucity of literature on psychological perspective particularly focusing on women in recent times. The immediate circumstances following her refusal to comply with *Sati*, left a woman no choice but to go along with it. The extremely harsh treatment of widows, dishonour to the family as well as being looked upon as inauspicious by the rest of society drove the women to willingly participate in the act (Major, 2006).

Vijayakumar, (2004) describes how the impositions made on the widows such as shaven heads, wearing only white clothing, and prohibition from wearing any other gold ornaments, made the widows favour *sati*. Those who committed *sati* or those who chose to commit *sati* on the other hand were glorified to the point of being worshipped. The desire for instant fame, goodwill, immortality and the assurance that they would be reunited with their husbands led to the woman wilfully subjecting herself to an altruistic suicide.

Allaman, Joyce, & Crandall (1972) in their research, studied two subject samples from the Fels longitudinal study to examine the development of social desirability (SD) response tendencies. The results of both studies indicated that "harsh" parental practices predict subsequent social desirability responses.

A study by Remus & Bogdan. (2021) confirms that the most common causes of self-harm in adolescents are related to family (abuse, arguments with parents, poor communication), school (bullying), and behaviour (cyberbullying, illicit substance use, rejection by a boy or girlfriend). If we observe the hidden facets, all of them are either related to fitting in or being accepted by society.

Car, S. (2013) in his “Adolescence of the 21st century: social conditioning, basic characteristics and pedagogical challenges”, emphasizes the role of current economic, social and political circumstances surrounding the growing-up process of children and young people. The era of the internet, cable TV, globalisation, increasing consumerism, terrorist attacks and concern for sustainable development impact contemporary adolescents. Such common experiences bring the members of a generation together, forming a generation as a specific phenomenon with certain characteristics and lifestyles that represent a pedagogical challenge for parents and teachers.

Mukundan, et al, (2014), presents a review of the findings of processes related to the origin of actions within the brain. In a model explaining the initiation of action, he proposes that actions are initiated when the drive reaches a certain critical level of potentiating (CLP). The only way to master control over the initiation of actions is by learning to control the drive within.

Socialization is a process that trains one in learning either to take the drive to critical levels, so that the linked actions are initiated, or to inhibit the drive so that the action is not initiated. This conditioning process takes place during the neurodevelopmental stages of a child if such control processes are present in society, and the child is provided with an opportunity to be trained. Emotional arousal is the fuel within each person that provides the individual with the drive to live, by acting and responding. Drive control and associated response inhibition ability are important outcomes of socialization processes that take place during the neural development of the brain of a growing child.

III. Methodology

The present study is structured on the conditioning theory. The Conditioning Theory refers to the behavioural process, whereby a reaction (response) becomes more frequent to a given object (stimulus) as a result of reinforcement, which is a reward for the response in a given situation. Data are collected from several secondary sources such as Google scholar, research gate, Academia.edu etc. The population group of young adults and adolescents has been selected for the reason that India's population is young.

IV. Discussion

B.F.Skinner, known as the father of operant conditioning, says based his theory on Thorndike's law of effect that the behaviour elicits, ensuring the continuity or discontinuity of the behaviour. If the consequences are pleasant, the individual seeks to continue the behaviour, if the consequences are painful or harmful, the behaviour will be discontinued. The same principle, when applied to a social setting becomes social conditioning. The individual will repeat or perform behaviours which society desires to get a positive reward of being accepted, praised etc., which makes them feel wanted and worthy. If the behaviour causes the individual to be ostracised or rejected, he/she will tend to avoid the behaviour. De Wall & Bushman (2011) state that social rejection can mean different things to different people eliciting heightened or diminished emotional and behavioural responses based on their personality and inner experiences. As humans are social beings, social rejection leads to anger, guilt, anxiety, depression and shame. To avoid all this, humans are conditioned to behave in a way accepted by society.

In case study 1, the widow performed sati because she felt honour bound to do so. Society has imposed that if she performed such an act, it is praiseworthy, it shows true devotion to her husband and her family honour would be held intact or even enhanced. All of these prompted her to willingly take the step to end her life. If the societal norm did not expect her to do so or if the society did not glorify the act, would she have done it? This is a question to be pondered over.

In case study 2, the two students were sent to college to study with great expectations by their parents. Society welcomed and accepted students who did well in academics, who stood first, who got good jobs and so on that it would have bestowed accolades on them. Parents feel proud of such children and feel as if their hard work has paid them off. If a child doesn't do well in school and teachers constantly criticized and abused them for getting poor marks, where does a student go? Dishonour to the parents and rejection by peers and teachers remain firmly grounded before an action is taken. Unable to understand where to get assurance and support, they are left with no choice but to seek their way out of stressful situations. If the parents and society in which the girls were accepted them even if they couldn't meet the expectations, would they have taken the extreme step?

As the present world has changed with the advent of the internet and technology, the society that the individual has to please and get approval from has changed and become greater. This desire to please and be accepted is the culprit for depression and anxiety in individuals. To address this problem, individuals have to have a well-developed sense of self and self-esteem. Even as young children, individuals have to be trained to think for themselves and taught self-support so that they are not swayed by what society tells them to do.

Psychological behaviour is dynamic as it corresponds with the social, political and economic changes in society that are contingent upon global networks. The traditional Indian society is no more in isolation and it has been modernizing since colonial times; in the way, it cannot thwart encounter the technological modernizing forces while keeping the cherished traditional ethos intact. In this context of social conditioning, Indian psychologists are required to pay close attention to addressing the psycho-pathological issues of the younger generation.

V. Conclusion

After examining the case studies and the literature review, it can be concluded that the impact of social conditioning has been there for ages. Though the instruments of social conditioning have changed from religious and ritualistic norms to economic and political ideologies, the influence remains unchanged. Adolescents and young adults especially are more influenced by the desire to conform and fit in. This desire when it clashes with who they are capable of being results in incongruence within their inner self which is the cause of many mental health issues such as anxiety, depression etc. Social conditioning is not something that can be eliminated. As man is a social animal, he needs society for optimal survival. However, one doesn't have to be dependent on society's norms for happiness and contentment. With a good sense of self-esteem and confidence, one can challenge the judgement of others. What an individual is to be or not to be, is to be decided by the individual alone for one's better mental health. The intervention suggested is that young adults and adolescents are to be taught good decision-making skills and a good self-concept aimed to understand themselves and their capacities to the full extent. The

study is limited in that it is only an analysis of the case studies selected. The current scenario of the world does support that social conditioning still is looming large and many adolescents and young people are succumbing to the pressure created by it. Hence further research and identification of intervention strategies about this are the need of the hour.

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