



## CONTEMPORARY LADAKH **A SUBTLE YET STRONG PATRIARCHY**

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The general perception is that in Ladakh the status of a woman is equal to that of a man. A minister on International Women's Day, commented it as a matter of pride that there exists no distinction between men and women in Ladakh. (Reach Ladakh 2012).

The Women Alliance of Ladakh - an NGO considers its main function as "raising the status of rural women and to strengthen local culture and agriculture" but nowhere among its six points of aims and objectives does it talk about emancipation and upliftment of the status of women. This is because there is a perception that there exists no patriarchal structure and women as a category do not face any inequality. Helena Norberg Hodge (2001) agrees to the marginalisation of women as a new

phenomenon of globalisation and talks about strong outgoing women being replaced by a new alienated generation. Though the status of women is relatively better in Ladakh than in other parts of India, this does not mean patriarchy does not exist in Ladakh.

### **I** **SOCIO-CULTURAL STRUCTURES IN** **LADAKH**

Socio-cultural structures that exist in Ladakh are neither innocent nor neutral. These structures continuously reiterate the identity of women - by defining who a woman is, what her roles are, how should she be dressed etc.

Women in Ladakh bear the brunt of loss of tradition and culture while the men folk not only escape the responsibility of preserving the culture but also define codes of conduct for women. Culturally a woman has to be submissive and dressed in a way that marks the symbol of Ladakhi culture. She has to sit in conformity with

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*Views expressed are author's own.*



Ladakhi notion of obedience and discipline. In parties and functions, either men sit before women or there are different rows for both.

The case is worse for women belonging to lower castes who are made to sit at the end of the room, after male members of their family.

Socially, a woman plays an insignificant role in community decisions. Community labour is one of the most prominent sites of gender discrimination - where men supervise the work and women play no role in decisions but work accordingly. Men supervise and women consent to their supervision because men are regarded as more intelligent and wiser.

The Personal experiences of the author in a village in Ladakh reflects this. Men sit on chair while women occupy the carpet laid near the chairs facing towards them. Meetings regarding the village are held in community halls where all the families are represented by male head of the family or other male members. In case male members are not able to attend, female family members attend. Decisions are made by some men and conveyed to others who are mere spectators. This means that all men of the community do not dominate.

While hegemonic masculinities dominate, women and subordinate masculinities are dominated. This is what is called "plural masculinities". "Hegemonic" and "subordinate" masculinity helps understand the differential access men

have over power and social privilege (Connell 1987). Even though male subjectivities vary vis-à-vis other men and women alike (for example, upper class women dominate lower class men), the fact still stands true that every male body dominates over a female body, every female body does not dominate over a male body, and so it is still the male who dominates.

Those who believe that gender equality exists in Ladakh base their argument on the fact that women in Ladakh look not only after the household but also after the fields and animals. Sarla Chhewang (2006) believes that a model exists in Leh, where women rub shoulders with men. She argues that there exists no patriarchal structure in Ladakh as women play not only an important part in the economy but also lead the economy. Nirmala Bora (2004) says that "women in Ladakh enjoy an enviable position. They are equal partners with men in almost all walks of life".

The proponents of equality forget that women are allowed to control their households as well as their fields not because women are believed to be better skilled or capable but because men go out of the villages. Stanzin Dawa (2006) correctly points out that "a large number of Ladakhi men are serving in the army, engaged in tourism, absorbed with monastery affairs as monk." In the process women are left alone, alienated, secluded from their families and "overburdened and neglected as an agent of social change". Katherine Hay (1997) supports the view by saying that "women are increasingly becoming associated with farming tasks... partly because so many women are now bearing the brunt of agricultural work with their husbands in paid employment and their children in school".

One should also not forget that no matter how hard a woman's work is, it is always considered inferior to that of a man's. What a man does is always superior and he enjoys every comfort when he comes

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home and is the head. A normal sight in a Ladakhi family will be the men of the family taking rest while women work when everyone returns home. In Muslim communities in the peripheral areas of Ladakh (Turtuk), women are not even allowed to work outside their home because it is considered "socially, morally wrong to live on earnings of women" (Interview citations: Paldan 2013).

Keeping silent, Ladakhi women have unconsciously taken charge of maintaining the social status of the family and protecting the social dignity of the husband. There are cases of domestic violence which have not come out in the open. This is because the burden lies with the women to endure pain for her family. Rinchen Angmo (2012) writes "accidents, crimes, family disputes and many more problems are rising due to the consumption of alcohol in Ladakh. Some people who take in large amounts of alcohol ruin their life, marriage and it may lead to domestic violence".

The fact that domestic violence is part of Ladakhi family can also be implicitly seen in Women's Wing of Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) fighting against alcoholism though not directly as its ill effects on the family - mostly on the women - but as fighting it for the sake of "removing the menace from the society and restoring the dignity and peace." (Dolma 2007-08). No matter what the torture is only a few Ladakhi women have revolted, while most have accepted beatings and tortures as "normal" way of life.

The Marriage system also reflects how certain marriages are preferred in patriarchal system. Katherine Hay (1997) talks about two systems of marriage practiced in Ladakh- Magpa and Bagma system - "in Magpa arrangement the male moves in with the wife's family. This form often occurs when the woman has no brother so she is the heiress.

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couple stays with the groom's parents". Hay also goes on to say that "in looking at Ladakh from a gendered perspective one of the social structures that seems particularly important in shaping authority appears to be the marriage structure(s)". Bagma marriages are preferred because men can preserve their dominant authority unlike in Magpa marriages in which even though men are superior to women they may not enjoy the same authority as they do in their own homes.

There is also a system of "skuches" literal translation "to steal", in which women are "tricked" into marriage against her will. This reflects how the "super confident woman" will not even know when she will be stolen. Women are confident because there is no gender bias in Ladakhi society as argued by an opinion piece on Peaceful Societies website. The term itself denies selfhood of and to women as if hers is an ownerless body - a property that can be stolen anytime. And it is this ownerless body of which men turn out to be the protector, according no agency to her but justifying his superiority and therefore patriarchy.

Heywood (2003) says "patriarchal ideas blur the distinction between sex and gender and assume that all socio-economic and political distinctions between men and women are rooted in biology or anatomy." This has been the case in Ladakh where female bodies are at the receiving end of communalism. While some like Nirmala Bora believe that a woman "has equal right in selecting a

life partner" but this view does not hold truth. Intermarriages have been controlled; women's choice of birth control has been regulated. In addition to female bodies as site of preservation of culture, such bodies are also treated as the guarantor of preservation of a particular religious community. The Female body has been what Sara Smith (2009) calls a "site of territorialisation" or "geopolitical gaze" (2011). Smith says that "discussions of demography quickly become discussions about women's bodies" as "struggles for territory are not contests over bounded state space alone, but are also struggles over the bodies that populate that space" (Smith:2011). Therefore there have been restrictions on inter-marriages in both the communities and "women's identity and status become the sites where politics are concretized and women's bodies became the arena where battles are fought" (Erturk 1997b). Jennifer Aengst (2008) mentions the compulsion and difficulties women face in taking decision regarding ligation or abortion because of responses from family members, and religious and political authorities. Conditions of women in Muslim communities are worse especially in distant places like Turtuk because, "family planning is against religion...lack of reproductive health care facilities...tremendously affects women's health resulting into untimely death (Paldan 2013)." Women have accepted outside control and of their bodies not only because of this being a "highly politicised and stigmatized issue, fear of being beaten up and separated by

religious associations of both the communities" but also because there has been no understanding of how their bodies are controlled. Although a female child is not disowned or killed, a male child is generally preferred. Preference for son is one of the many factors responsible for growth of Muslim population according to Jennifer Aengst (2008) based on her interview with Muslim women. "Patriarchy" therefore, says Weedon, "produces colonized forms of female identity and subjectivity". Having no girl child is sometimes regretted because parents feel they do not have hands to work despite having boys, because boys are not meant to work at home. This is a common statement heard in Ladakh. Proponents of gender equality will immediately find it problematic because such statements intend to restrict a woman within the household domain, restricting her freedom. It also reflects how patriarchal views are imbibed deep within people's mindset though unconsciously.

Women are disciplined to reiterate their identity their role not only by their male counterpart but also by female run organisations. This is what Real calls "psychological patriarchy", patriarchal thinking common to men and women. Moral policing by women associations in order to preserve Ladakhi culture and controlling women by various means - one among them to check the way women dress up reflects disciplining of women to perform her gender role. Bodies therefore seen as sites of preservation of culture are accordingly made to perform certain activities. Judith Butler (1990) calls these "performativity - not a single act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalisation in the context of the body, understood in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration." Thus the identity of women is continuously produced in order to sustain the power structures that subjugate women.

*Many factors in Leh deprive the students of quality education, foremost being the medium of instruction. Leh, having a different dialect and language altogether, cannot match the alien language when they are taught in the classrooms from the primary level.*



## II INSTITUTIONALISATION OF PATRIARCHY: ROLE OF RELIGION

Religious institutions also define the identity of the bodies marked as female and are also sites of male domination. Certain sections of Buddhist monasteries are barred for women, even though those sections usually would have female deities. Females, in one particular Buddhist temple, are not allowed inside in pants (seen as modern male attire). Such bodies were made to put on goncha (Ladakhi traditional male attire).

Usually women from the same or nearby village are not allowed to enter the monastery in pants, even with goncha. This was the case of two women who belonged to a distant place in Ladakh. Surprised by this, when I asked why she is made to wear that, I was answered "because she lacks the genital of men" meaning she "lack" something which male body possess. This is blurring the lines of distinction between sex and gender which Heywood talks about and is a clear representation of man's domination and his efforts at preserving the status-quo.

The above act shows inferiority of one sex to the other, and how a female body is made to perform her gender role and a male performs his. In case of a Muslim woman she has to bear not only the societal patriarchal forces but also religious forces in a stricter way. From the veil to other religious practices Muslim women find themselves at the receiving end of male interpretation of Islam. Sordellini (2010) focuses on a range of scholars working on women in West Asia such as Leila Ahmed (1992), Barlas (2002), Mernissi (1991) and others who believe that it is not Islam but the interpretation of Islam that oppresses and controls women. They argue that Islam is not inherently a misogynist religion, rather it is the interpretation at the expense of women's status that rationalise the male domination.

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Not just Islam but no other religion is biased towards men. In fact in every religion every human being is capable of following the right path and is therefore equal. It is the male dominated interpretation of religions that seek to prioritise the male over female. The patriarchal social dynamics of culture support and encourage such interpretation and such interpretations in turn support the patriarchal nature of the society. Therefore the institutionalisation of patriarchy leads to its legalisation which in turn results in domination. It is the structures, the laws, the rules of the game that hold women back. Politics is one clear representation of marginalisation of women.

Politically women are far behind men. In Ladakh the centre of the decision making system is male dominated. There are no women among current executives in councils of both Leh and Kargil. 2 out of 30 members are women (1:15) in Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Leh and there is not a single woman in the district administration of Kargil (LAHDC-Leh, Kargil official website). There is no department looking into issues of women.

Absence of women in the most important decision making body reveals the truth about what ministers and others boast about "the dominant position women have held since ages" (The Tribune 2011). Dawa points out that "democracy hardly exists for women in Ladakh; women are still not admitted as full and equal

members and citizens in the local government and political set up." Paldan (2013) describes the condition of women in Turtuk village where "women have been least represented in decision making".

The government records of the elected panchs and sarpanchs of Leh district for 2011 shows that there is not a single female sarpanch from the nine blocks and the number of women panchs is 199 out of 588 elected (List of elected sarpanchs/panchs, District:Leh, Election Authority, Chief Electoral Officer, Jammu and Kashmir). How influentially and freely can the elected women representatives act is further determined by the men. Still no one talks about the marginalisation of women because the powerful maintain the status-quo, and those who are victimised feel too weak to raise their voices.

Militarization for the reasons of security has always been a touchy subject for women. Separatists in the country often see measures like AFSPA being imposed. The most direct target of such laws is the female gender. In border areas of Ladakh, there are cases where women are promised marriage by army personnel only to find herself left betrayed. Most of them are never married and also face seclusion from the society. Though there has not been many cases, the fact that from women organizations to ministers nobody talks about their rights is a major concern.

The Pains of widows of martyred soldiers

are also an untold truth. Their stories reflect how a patriarchal society, makes women so dependent on her husband, it becomes difficult for her to survive without him. "To noone's surprise the biggest complain of these widows is against their gender as they held their womanhood responsible for their problems and sufferings. They feel handicapped being a woman when their voices are not heard or being ignored by the administrative authority and the society as such. In such difficult times they strongly feel, had their family been headed by a male member they would be living a hassle free and contented life. They blame their lack of assertiveness, language constraint and being habitual to consistent setbacks they face within their daily life and not having the guts or will to raise voice against any injustice" reports Rinchen Dolma (Reach Ladakh 2009).

Blaming oneself for being a woman (though referring to their sex) these women are actually complaining about the gender role they are made to play and the inherent inequality it carries but failing to differentiate between the two.

Much worse is the fact that today hardly anyone speaks for their cause.

### III CONCLUSION

Femininity is an identity produced by the effects of institutions, practices, discourses. Butler says because "female" is not a stable term it is continuously naturalised by its "performativity". The concept of male superiority is also naturalised in the process. "Patriarchal masculinity is not, natural. It is acquired through the process of socialisation... teach men and boys.....covering up their own weaknesses" (Weedon 1999).

Edward Said (1977) in Orientalism talks about how while defining the "orient", the west accords itself superiority. Implying this, one can understand how patriarchal structures define the other as an inferior

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sex in order to represent itself as the dominant one. Ladakhi society is strongly embedded with patriarchal structures. Somebody correctly pointed out there is no Ladakhi term for rape. This does not mean that rape does not happen. In fact patriarchal structures are stronger in Ladakh because the power relations between men and women are so blurred that there is no recognition of oppression of women. "Female live dispersed among the males...there is a bond that unites her to her oppressor" (Beauvoir), which makes it difficult for Ladakhi women to stand up against her oppressor. The Submissiveness of the female body is considered the natural way culturally, socially, religiously and politically. Even though male subjectivity changes according to the context, it does not affect the woman because it is again the men who dominate.

Women need to be conscious of their suppression and should come together as a category in itself and not as "rural" women and urban. According to Simone De Beauvoir (2011), "women lack a concrete means for organising themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with correlative unit". It is this lack of recognition of women as a category which is prevalent in Ladakh.

Family is so intact that going against the male member is seen as effects of modernisation which has taken away the idealness of a woman. Added to this is the notion of "Ladakhi humbleness", Ladakh being different from rest of the world which restrains women from questioning their subordination. Of course the preservation of tradition is important but it should not be at the cost of the victimisation of women. One should be clear that what women seek is equality and not domination; freedom to control her body and not to control others. Erturk (2004) clarifies that "gender equality is not about a battle of the sexes but rather about changing a social order that breeds domination, exploitation and violence that have consequences both for men and women."

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Women in Ladakh are controlled strongly by patriarchal forces and their status is low. Therefore much needs to be done for gender equality rather than restricting women's role to "culture" preservation. The first step in Ladakh would be unveiling the patriarchal structure and uniting women under one banner. It is the lack of recognition of forms of oppression among Ladakhi community that has sustained patriarchal structures. Organisations have to stand up to protect women rather than reinforcing male domination. Gender education is needed (which is absent in Ladakhi schools), awareness of rights of women, violence against female body inside and outside the house should be imparted. This will be possible when all forces work towards the upliftment of the status of women.

Status-quoist forces will oppose but change is not impossible. Departments dealing with the issues of women should come up in the LAHDC. There is a Department of Social Welfare which deals with poverty, destitute old men and women. There is also an Integrated Child Development Service for children between 06 months to 06 years, pregnant women, lactating mothers and adolescent girls. The main aim of the scheme is to provide awareness about health, education. But no department talks about the rights and welfare of women. Efforts should be made to accord dignity to women, equality and freedom - to work, to dress, to walk and to be herself in every way she wants to

be. Once conscious of patriarchal forces, women will be surprised to know how much violence their silence accepts.

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