

‘LAJ’, THE CONCEPT FOR HONOUR, SHAME AND MODESTY OF A WOMAN IN INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Abstract

This article deals with the concept of honor, shame and modesty of an Indian woman as depicted in popular Hindi movies and as described in religious and cultural traditions. ‘Laj’ or ‘Lajja’ are the Hindi words used for modesty, shame and honor of a woman. The concept ‘Laj’ is complex due to its sensitivity and the feelings that a woman has to experience in the course of life. Laj is depicted in media as an issue of family honor. A woman has to obey certain cultural and traditional norms to secure her Laj. This article offers a socio-cultural analysis of a Hindi movie Lajja released in 2001, specifically focused on an Indian woman’s religious and social status in Indian society and underlying discriminations. This movie is distinctive because it brings to light different themes about a woman’s status (e.g. Husband’s lordship vs. Woman’s dignity and self-respect, female infanticide, dowry, exploitation, and class discrimination) in India while targeting atrocities committed against Indian women. This article describes the mainly feminine concept ‘Laj’ in the light of the themes as depicted in the movie and as presented in Hindu religious and cultural traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Kit Winter: Theo, for Christ's sake, life is not a movie.

Theo: Yeah it is. Come on, whatever you say, whatever you do, movies always got there first. Even that line you just said comes from a movie, um - Kevin Spacey in the end of, uh, Swimming With Sharks.

(Do the I, English Movie, 2003)

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Movies may help the viewers to see the “for-granted” aspects of life in a clear exploratory perspective where things are not blurred as they remain in everyday life following conformity and submission. Status of women in the traditional complex societies is a topic that remains blurred under the automatic for-granted gendered constructs that rarely allow the society members to have another perspective. The sensitivity of women issues (regarding gender discrimination) is grounded in religious and social stereotypes and accordingly implied social system, often shielded by social and religious authorities. Hence, it is also a brave task to bring a woman’s life in the media in the form of narrative film story. Such movies may not grab much attention from the viewers seeking conformity with the society they live in, but spread a strong explicit message that follows them in everyday life. “*Lajja*” is one of the rarely produced movies in Indian context that drive a nail right in the heart of religious and social stigma of Indian culture that compromises a woman’s fundamental human rights in the name of “*Lajja*”. *Laj* or *Lajja* is a feminine concept related to the modesty, chastity, and honor of a woman in Indian society.

Mujhe Lajja aati hai
I feel a sense of shame (Lajja)
(Lajja, Hindi Movie, 2001)

“Don’t you have a sense of shame? You are defying family traditions. You cannot go against your father/husband. Your immodesty will ruin the whole family”. In Indian cultural context, these sentences are ‘whispered’ or ‘shouted’ very often in the middle and lower middle class families to protect the modesty of the woman and honor of the family. The consequences are dangerous for the woman who fails to understand this ‘whisper’ and for the family who do not communicate this ‘message’. A traditional Indian woman is not an individual identity, but she is a central figure in an Indian family where she upholds the family honor by preserving her social status as identified by the mainly male dominated religious epics and socio-political forces. The gendered concept of modesty and shame, thus takes an important place in the description of an Indian woman. Indian culture, dominated by Hinduism but influenced by many other religions and traditions, gives a ‘feminine’ description of modesty and shame that is similar to other South-Asian cultures in many aspects.

As soon as a baby-girl steps into girlhood, she learns to behave like a ‘modest’ girl who is the honor of the family that must be protected by her obedience and under the supervision of the male members of the family. Media, as an important factor in presenting culture, unveils the social practices of different cultural ideas related to a woman. Cinema is a big and popular media source that reflects and affects cultural and social attitudes. Portrayals of a woman in Hindi cinema display a picture of

Indian society that is also not limited to India. ‘Woman’ in Hindi cinema and other popular media has been used as a concept to express religious, cultural, and social aspects of the gendered Indian society. Influenced by religious myths and epics, traditional norms and values, and politics of patriarchal social system, a woman is presented in specific roles. Some of the ideal roles a woman is portrayed are; a traditional obedient wife devoted to her ‘husband-lord’, a kind mother sacrificing for her children, a beloved fighting against cultural and social norms for her lover. Besides, in negative roles she is an item-girl, an adulterous and murderous woman. Another aspect of a woman description in Hindi movies is a victim for revenge, humiliation and disgrace. An attempt, successful or unsuccessful, to rape a woman is an easy and effective way the villain chooses to humiliate the hero. The roles a woman is portrayed also describe a man as a protector, a lord, an easy prey for woman’s ‘lust’ and ‘beauty’, and a destroyer of honor and shame.

Presentation of a woman in Indian media describes her central character in a family oriented patriarchal society where she as a traditional woman, consciously or unconsciously, resists the modern feminist notions and western individualism (Fazal, 2009). Hence, the presentation of a woman in Indian media in different positive and negative roles is a reflection of the mythological description of a woman disposition, cultural and religious description of gender roles, and a conflict of traditional and modern Indian woman. Hindi cinema is mostly occupied with musical, romantic and action movies, but there are few movies that addressed social issues and specifically woman issues. Hindi movie ‘*Lajja*’ released in 2001 is one of the movies dealing with woman issues in Indian society. In this article, I am discussing the understanding of the concept of honor, shame and modesty named as *Laj* or *Lajja* of a woman as depicted in the movie. The article offers a narrative analysis of the movie in its socio-cultural perspective pursuing the description of the status of the woman in Indian popular culture. This study investigated;

- How does the movie *Lajja* portray the social status of a woman in Indian society?
- What are the institutionalized forms of gender discrimination, as presented in different narratives in the movie?
- How do the core religious texts describe a woman?
- How do the religious and social power structure locate woman in the social sphere of life?

This movie is distinctive because it brings to light four different themes about a woman’s status in India while targeting atrocities committed against Indian women. The movie met with controversy by different religious and cultural schools soon after

it was released. The movie portrays ‘Woman’ or ‘Sita’ (the ideal woman) who in an effort to gain ‘*Atm-samman*’ (self-respect) challenges the so-called religious and cultural settings for the women. The movie presents the questionable status of a woman in Indian society under the following narratives.

1. Woman as an entity of reproduction: A pregnant woman escapes from her husband’s home who after being impotent in an accident wants to get the baby. The woman cannot find shelter in her parents’ home because it is against the family’s honor.
2. The Dowry Practice: A girl, whose father was humiliated and threatened to break up the marriage by her in-laws for dowry, refused to marry.
3. Ascribed Chastity: A pregnant stage artist is rejected by her lover on suspicion for having relations with the old man (owner of the theatre) who tries to exploit her. She was tortured by the mob for challenging the religious texts about a woman from ‘*Ramayana*’.
4. Violence of Discrimination: A Dalit (lower caste) woman being gang raped and killed by the upper caste because his son and daughter of the *Thakur* (upper caste landlord) are in love.

In the light of above-mentioned themes as depicted in Hindi movie ‘*Lajja*’ and relevant religious literature, this article explores the mainly feminine concept ‘*Laj*’.

METHODOLOGY

Lajja is a movie that provides stories of four women who faced inequality and discrimination. Selection of the movie was primarily based on these different stories of the women life, yet directed towards the same gendered status. To focus on the meanings of the reality portrayed in the movie and to examine the topics (Denzin, 1989), the researcher engaged himself with the movie as a nonparticipant observer (Tan and Ko, 2004). The researcher watched the movie several times and divided the whole movie in four parts that told about the different narratives. Emphasizing the literary aspects of the movie, characters, settings, plot and symbols were focused to unveil narrative and ideological constructs in the movie. Every part was carefully watched, significant dialogues were noted and their relevancy with religion and culture identified. Sub-themes were emerged from each part of the movie and a connection was investigated with reference to the four major themes of the narratives.

Meanings of the narratives were interpreted at referential, explicit, implicit and symptomatic levels. To reach the clarity about the religious depiction of the status of the women in the movie, it was important to review status of a woman in Hindu religious scripture. For the purpose, authentic religious text was studied and used to interpret the religious themes. Hence a significant section of the findings includes a review of religious literature regarding women. A detailed discussion provided a socio-cultural analysis of the social context and social reality in connection with a woman's status in Indian socio-religious context and underlying ideological reality.

DISCUSSION

I do! I do feel a sense of shame (Lajja)! A land where womenfolk are given the exalted position of Goddesses...a land where people scale mountains...singing glories to the Goddess Mother...a woman, a mother, was raped and burnt alive. And no one even bothered to enquire. Such is the hypocrisy of a nation in which I was born. I feel shame (Lajja) of that! To see my men-folk remain mute spectators to atrocities, perpetrated in their presence...I feel ashamed (Lajja) to acknowledge their impotency. I feel ashamed when I see womenfolk rendered helpless. Even today, in several villages...the female child is killed at birth. Several unmarried girls kill themselves...for fear of not taking enough dowry to their in-laws. And yet others are burnt alive after marriage. Even before a girl can think for herself...she is married away...as if she were a burden they want to get rid of. A woman who has not borne a child... is spurned with the label of a barren woman. I do feel a sense of shame (Lajja)! (Lajja, Hindi Movie, 2001)

Laj or Lajja

Laj is derived from Sanskrit word *Lajja* meaning shyness, modesty or shame that also indicates a woman's feelings in the presence of strangers (especially in an Indian cultural context). *Laj* is also used for *Purdha* (veiling) that has been a cultural feminine trait in Indian history (Singhji, 1994). The concept is complex due to its sensitivity. The situations and feelings that a woman has to experience in the course of life at one hand and on the other male authority and responsibility to protect her *Laj* are culturally constructed regardless of any religious affiliation. During 1947 riots in India (at the time of partition of United India into India and Pakistan), hundreds of

women were either killed by their own men, or they committed suicide to save their chastity that might be ruined by the opposing faction to humiliate the target group. The women who were abducted or missed were later (at the time of reunion after partition) abandoned by their families because they might not be pure and not fit for the family anymore. Even today honor-killing, dowry-killing, physical and psychological torture for a woman not being fit in the family for any reason, using females for tribal disputes, and abusing them to humiliate the opposing group or person is still in practice. That is why; *Laj* is depicted as an issue of family honor in literature, movies, songs and folk-literature.

A woman, performing her role as daughter, sister, wife or mother has to obey certain cultural and traditional norms to secure her *Laj* that is in fact the honor of the whole family in the society. Thus, *Lajja* or *Laj* is a required output of a set of instructions and restrictions designed and implemented by the culture to control all aspects of social behaviour of a woman including her clothing, way of talking and other verbal or non-verbal gestures. To explain this feminine concept, it is important to understand a woman's disposition and status in Hinduism and Indian culture.

Woman in Hindu Religious Scripture

India, a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country of over one billion population, is a complex blend of religious traditions and ancient customs. Hinduism is a dominated religion and due to its adaptable nature was historically influenced by the other cultures and religions that came to India but at the same time also influenced other non-Hindu cultures (Jones and Ryan, 2007). While giving a description of Hinduism as a religion, Flood (1996) finds it problematic to reach a certain definition of Hinduism due to the absence of a single historical founder, a belief system, and a centralized authority. He (1996, p.7) refers the saying of Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of independent India that Hinduism is "all things to all men". Anyhow four Vedas (Ancient Hindu scriptures) are considered the foundation of Hinduism. Other influential religious texts are *Manusmriti* (that is considered the authoritative scripture for describing rules of good conduct) and Hindu narrative traditions, the epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (that are often considered as fifth Vedas and also an integral part of folk-theatre).

Manusmriti, known in English as the Laws of Manu was first translated by Sir William Jones (1796) as "The ordinances of Menu". *Mahabharata* is significant because of *Bhagavad-Gita* (Songs of the Lord) and presentation of female destructive powers, whereas *Ramayana* is distinctive for the description of *Sita*, the ideal woman (Jones and Ryan, 2007; Flood, 1996). These epics also hold a distinct place in Indian

culture and society. Though there are contradictions within the religion and also cultural variation across the country that has shaped a multifaceted perception about the status of the woman, but a woman's disposition as described in religious scriptures and as presented in epics is a mystery. She is a goddess and a demon as well. In social life, woman is an integral part of the family welfare and gods bestow prosperity on the families where a woman is being honored. Contrary, the families not honoring the female relations are destroyed gradually. *Manusmriti* encourages men to seek family welfare by honoring the family women;

Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire (their own) welfare. Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers. The houses, on which female relations, not being duly honored, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic. Hence men who seek (their own) welfare should always honor women on holidays and festivals with (gifts of) ornaments, clothes, and (dainty) food. (*Manusmriti*, 3:55-59)

She is a queen of her son's household and gods are pleased with the families where woman is honored and cared by fathers, husbands, brothers and sons. A mother is like a god and she must be respected and obeyed by sons and their wives (Sarasvati, 2009). *Mahabharata* portrays a mother as a shelter; she is the dearest, and she deserves protection, love, respect and obedience because she gives birth, she feeds and nursed. Nevertheless answering the question, why a woman should not be trusted, we see from Eve (Biblical Myths) to Pandora (Greek Myth), a woman's identity shares some similarities, increasing the mystery about the woman and her varying status under the influence of certain myths. A woman forced by the 'curiosity' tends to go against the Divine directives, thus tempting a man to follow her; she acts as a satanic weapon to allure the Man. Hinduism gives a much similar disposition of a woman. *Manusmriti* describes a woman as a creature of impure desires and inconsistent soul that is polluted with greed, wrath and wickedness. She is naturally greedy, heartless and disloyal. "(When creating them) Manu allotted to women (a love of their) bed, (of their) seat and (of) ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice, and bad conduct."(*Manusmriti*, 9:17)

Mahabharata is also not different while presenting a woman's disposition as stained with sins, tricks, illusions, and lust. A man is responsible to protect himself from the natural weaknesses of a woman, and she must be guided, protected and controlled by the man. Otherwise due to dangerous disposition she may bring disaster to the whole family. According to *Manusmriti*:

Her father protects in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations, however trifling (they may appear); for, if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow on two families. (*Manusmriti*, 9:3-5)

According to Sarsawati, the description of a woman's nature in *Manusmriti* has influenced the customs and tradition in India. "Such distrust and such low estimate of woman's nature and character in general, is at the root of the custom of seclusion of woman in India" (Sarsawati, 2009, p.54). She further describes the classification of Hindu religion as masculine and feminine religion, where feminine religion is to obey her husband-lord. She is like a 'marital property' and husband has the right to abandon her and deprive her of the property if he is not happy with her.

Though as a mother, a woman has high esteem in Hinduism, yet the gender of the offspring does matter. A woman having sons is regarded more respectful. "May you be the mother of a hundred sons" is a traditional wedding wish and *Punsawan Sanskar* ceremony during pregnancy is a pray for son because a sonless woman is unfortunate. Kapoor (2005) while giving positive and negative pictures of a woman in Hindu scriptures also discloses a contradiction. A woman is like a goddess having a sacred body. She is the queen of the house. Kapoor says that in Vedic times, women and men were equal in many aspects, but after Muslim invasion in India, women were restricted to home. Anyhow, while giving a negative picture of woman in Hindu scriptures he refers *Veda* and other Hindu scripture that describes the woman an inferior creation. *Niyogpratha* (ancient Aryan custom of childless widow or women having sexual intercourse with a man other than husband to beget child), *sati pratha* (custom of burning the widow with the body of her dead husband), and *dasipratha* (keeping the slave girls) were the ancient Hindu traditions. Being a widow was not less than a curse. She was considered ill-fated and was not allowed to live like a normal woman. She was restricted to live her life alone, not participating in any household ceremonies. Even today, becoming a widow, though the widow is not burnt with the husband, she has to live a dreadful life. Lamb (2000)'s study in North India uncovers a widow's dilemma for being a woman without a husband. She has to

go through the religious rituals (including head-shaving) and to live the widowhood with 'modesty' and 'faithfulness' to her dead husband. Everything that gives meaning to life should be avoided. Eating little and poor food (absence of anything that can make the body strong and beautiful) and wearing a white dress with no ornaments (absence of anything that is colorful or cheerful) will make her unattractive for others. Her weak and ugly body will control her 'desires'. Thus, all the pains and suffering she may experience is necessary for her devotion to her 'husband-lord', her '*Laj*' as a widow and of the whole family.

Therefore, the desire for sons, discriminated attitude towards widows or the women having only daughters and controversial description of a woman's disposition are a part of Hindu religion. Kapoor (2005, p.58-63) gives references from *Vedas* and *Manusmriti* for both sides of Hinduism.

Chapter 9 of *Manusmriti*, the textual tradition of Hinduism, provides the law for husband-wife relationship. It gives permission to a husband to punish his wife or to bring another wife in certain conditions. For example;

For one year let a husband bear with a wife who hates him; but after (the lapse of) a year let him deprive her of her property and cease to cohabit with her. She who shows disrespect to (a husband) who is addicted to (some evil) passion, is a drunkard, or diseased, shall be deserted for three months (and be) deprived of her ornaments and furniture. She who drinks spirituous liquor, is of bad conduct, rebellious, diseased, mischievous, or wasteful, may at any time be superseded (by another wife). A barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year, she whose children (all) die in the tenth, she who bears only daughters in the eleventh, but she who is quarrelsome without delay. (*Manusmriti*, 9:77-81)

This description of a woman's disposition and status in Hindu religious scripture gives an overview of the formation of concept of a 'modest' woman with a sense of shame in a Hindu society. The culture of sub-continent including Muslim societies of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India has been influenced more or less by this description and the way they are portrayed to define a woman role in the society in movies and dramas.

Lajja, the Movie

In the beginning, the researcher has referred to closing dialogue of the main character Vaidehi of Hindi movie *Lajja* (2001). Vaidehi is a pregnant woman living in New York. Her husband is unfaithful and abuses her in different ways. She ran away from her house. Her husband (after being impotent in an accident) came to know about her pregnancy and chased her to India to get his heir. Her parents' response was exactly the same as can be expected by the Indian parents, "Once married, woman's home is her husband's home. The home a woman enters after marriage, she ought to leave only in death." (*Lajja*, Hindi Movie, 2001). In a famous Pakistani movie *Daachi* (1964), a Tonga (horse-cart) driver, while singing a well-wishing song, advises the maiden bride to protect the *Laj* of her family in her in-laws, even if the bridegroom is not a match for her. For the sake of family's honor and Vaidehi's modesty, her parents forced her to go back because their family and her husband's honor are on risk because of her 'unwise' step to leave her husband's home, "People will point fingers and will say bad words. The honor of our family is in your hands, as also your husband's honor." (*Lajja*, Hindi Movie, 2001). Vaidehi's reply was a question and the voice of a sensitive Indian woman who is mute for the sake of her *Laj*, "in every family, it is the woman who shoulders the honor, but the woman has no honor" (*Lajja*, Hindi Movie, 2001).

The vulnerability attached to a female is not natural but cultural. She is taught to play a role where she has to obey what the 'protector' says. Husband-wife relation is meaningful as it establishes the status of a woman to build up her own family where she practices her natural abilities to bring up and to nurture the children. However, a family for a woman in Indian culture is not limited to her husband and children but the in-laws (husband's parents, brothers, sisters). A man, with the confidence of having more strength and bravery than a woman has, performs his role as a guard, protector, and care-taker. Unfortunately, very often this culturally constructed 'authority' is practiced to dominate as absolute authority leading to violence against woman. This violence varies from traditional practices to intended crimes according to the status of the woman in the family. Few examples the traditional practices of gender-based violence are:

- Child marriage
- *Sati* (burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband)
- *Devadasi*, a woman who serve gods (a Hindu religious tradition in which girls are married and dedicated to a deity or temple)

- Forced pregnancy and abortion

Besides religious and cultural traditions, other reasons include the greed for property and excuse for second marriage. Some of the perceptions about woman's role and gender discrimination are;

- Discrimination on the basis of physical and mental strengths.
- Discrimination on the basis of social and economic status.

A female child should be trained to serve the male members of the family because an ideal wife is the one, whose love is selfless like mother and whose service is dedicated like daughter (this concept goes for an ideal daughter and an ideal mother as well). A female child should learn the submission of her own will. This is the role she has to play towards her parents when unmarried, and to her husband when married. The real home of a daughter is her husband's home, and she is supposed to leave her parents, brothers and sisters one day (Qamar, 2010). Alarming gender discrimination statistics in India also indicate the vulnerability of women in a society where male dominancy is religiously and culturally supported. Due to social control of these traditional forces, not all the gender-based discrimination cases are properly reported.

Woman as an Entity of Reproduction

Vaidhei, in this movie, was seen as an entity of reproduction that was required by her husband for the child. She was also forced by her husband to mix up in the gatherings where a woman was used for business relationships. When Vaidhei resisted to join such gatherings, she was labeled as old fashioned.

Mere vicha rpurane zaroor hai lekin, aapke vichaar ganday
aur giraune hain

My thoughts are definitely old, but your thoughts are dirty
and nasty

She, after a sheer disappointment from her husband, condemned his living style and refused to be objectified for his business deals. She was pregnant, and she came to know that her husband wanted to take over the baby and her worth was no more than a vessel to bear the baby. She took a bold step, and while compromising on so-called

Laj, she ran for her *Atm-Saman* (self-respect). Her journey begins and she discovers the truth of an Indian woman while observing different types of violence.

The Dowry Practice

Maithili, the first encounter of Vaidhei and the second woman in the movie, is a young bride who along with her father is being humiliated by the groom's father because the dowry money is less than the demanded. She felt the grief of her father for being a girl's father, "My poor Papa...He was begging each person for forgiveness as if...he's committed a grave sin by giving birth to a girl." (*Lajja*, Hindi Movie, 2001). She could not stand this and finally refused the groom. She thought it better than to go to a family where she is valued by her dowry. When everybody was shocked on her reaction and her father was crying, her grandmother appreciated her saying; "You have raised a woman's dignity. If we were the first to take this initiative, the dowry tradition would be no more".

Dowry is the money, ornaments, property and other things 'gifted' by the bride's parents to their daughter that is either culturally obligatory or demanded by the groom and groom's parents. In case dowry is not gifted or not up to the requirements of the groom's parents, a bride has to pay the price. She may be tortured physically or mentally and even she might be killed. Dowry, even if not demanded explicitly, groom's parents formally expect it from the bride's parents in a sophisticated way, saying "Whatever you will give to your daughter after all belongs to her". It is usual that a girl's parents start collecting dowry since her birth. Dowry, though demanding or taking is considered a crime in India, yet the situation could not be changed significantly. Dowry remains in practice in different forms before and after marriage. Number of daughters in a family is an easy way to understand the sadness and economical pressure they exert on the family head. Dowry is also one of the reasons why people want sons. Sex selective abortion and female infanticide are illegal but an easy way to get rid of this 'burden'. Why not spend some money in the beginning instead of spending a huge amount of money whole life?

Ascribed Chastity

Woman is vulnerable, at her home or at a workplace. She is not trustworthy, even a lover singing love songs for his mistress and vowing his loyalty with her can get suspicious about her. *Rama* and *Sita*, as central characters of famous love story and Hindu religious epic *Ramayana*, portray the ideal Indian woman showing her strong devotion for her husband-lord and a perfect Indian man proving himself as a protector of his honor '*Sita*'. *Sita*, after being abducted by *Ravana* (the villain in the story) and

then rescued by her brave husband and lover *Rama*, was asked to go for a test named as *Agni pariksha* (to go through the fire to prove her purity) for her purity. *Sita*, living away from *Rama* in the possession of *Ravana*, was suspected to be ‘touched’ by *Ravana*. Thus, if she could successfully go through the *Agni* (fire), she is pure. That she did and succeeded. Santoshi(2001) as a producer and director of the movie *Lajja* evokes the question of modesty in *Ramayana*. Janki, the third woman in the movie, a stage artist in a folk-theatre, is performing the role of *Sita* in *Ramayana*. The theatre owner tries to exploit her but after continuous failure; he poisons her lover with doubts about her modesty. Her lover gets suspicious about her and asks her to abort the baby. Janki, after being shocked by such a behaviour from her lover, refused to abort the child, "If I am chaste, and then I'm chaste with this child. Not otherwise. If he accepts me, it has to be with the baby. Or not at all."(*Lajja*, Hindi Movie, 2001). She reacts on the stage while performing *Agni pariksha* and questions the credibility of Lord *Rama* while telling about her devotion to *Rama* and her vulnerability as a woman.

Every moment I spent in Lanka felt like eternity but I took your name and survived. And the outcome is that...you question my chastity. You worry about your family, goodness and gallantry but never thought about your life partner. I too could have stayed in the royal palace like *Urmila* but I considered you God and came to the forest with you. I did my duty as a wife and you are punishing me!
If I'd given in to *Ravana's* wish, both of you would lose the war without fighting. Then...what would happen to your gallantry, your lineage, righteousness?
As for the test, both of us have stayed away from each other. Both of us should undergo the ordeal by fire. (*Lajja*, Hindi Movie, 2001)

Reacting this way about the *Ramayana*, Janki questions the ‘ideal’ role of *Sita*. Therefore, audience shows their reaction as a ‘true’ guardian of the religion. Consequently, being tortured by the mob for challenging the religious texts about woman from ‘*Ramayana*’, she lost her child and got mad.

A husband-wife relationship is a trust relationship both ways. Husband spends most of his time out of the house as the bread-earner of the family and woman performs her duty at home as a mother and a wife. Yet a woman is guided by her husband by verbal instructions or non-verbal gestures how to live at home. She is told about ‘strangers’ and relatives. A set of instruction about do’s and do not’s, and supervision

by in-laws is necessary to protect *Laj*. Hence, the ‘fears’ give meaning to the traditional concept of a bride’s *Laj*. The way she talks, walks and interact, describes her modesty and nobility. A girl with little outspokenness and openness may be taken as a ‘vulgar’ woman as compared to a boy who with the same attitude might be considered a ‘confident’ man. If one of the women in the family is ‘vulgar’, people may have wrong perceptions about the other women in the family.

Violence of Discrimination

The fourth woman in the movie is a Dalit (lower caste) woman, Ramdulari, who is gang raped and killed by the upper caste *Thakurs* because her son and daughter of the *Thakur* (upper caste landlord) are in love. Ramdulari is a mid-wife who has strong feelings for women's rights. We see her role in Dalit community as a savior and a preacher. She is against the village tradition of drowning a new-born girl into milk to get her back as a son in the next birth. She resisted this tradition, saved a new-born girl’s life and scolded the merciless father, “If this was done to your mother, how would you take birth? Murderers! This is a latent mother! What will remain in the world if you kill a mother?” (*Lajja*, Hindi Movie, 2001). Ramdulari was also seen as a woman right activist in the movie. She was running a vocational training school where she educated village women about their rights and dignity. She was seen counseling a woman whose head was shaved and face was smeared with black ink by the Thakurs, because she refused the bounded labor. However, finally Ramdulari was a victim of the revenge of the *Thakurs* for challenging their “*Laj*” by her son.

Since, at present female infanticide and sex-selective abortions are common in India, women are decreasing in numbers as compared to men. A girl is a burden because she needs extra care to protect her *Laj*. A huge amount of money is needed for her marriage. She is not considered to carry the father’s name in lineage.

These four themes about the status of a woman in Indian culture as depicted in the movie *Lajja*, gives a gloomy picture of the Indian society where a woman is ‘respectable’ if she has *Lajja*, and knows how to be consistent in the religious and cultural domains designed for a woman. All the four themes describe a woman’s discriminated status in Indian socio-religious context with a consensus on considering woman as a property or object in all spheres of life.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I tried to uncover the gendered issues in Indian society having their roots in religious and cultural traditions that cannot be resolved by forced

implementation of the law. The pride that arises for being a man is 'natural' in the society where a 'man' is defined as a '*Pati – Parmeshwar*' (Husband is God). Further practices of dowry, concepts of *Laj* constructed under male dominations, prejudices about woman disposition increase the false sense of pride in men. Similarly, the reservation mentioned by Indian government about the article 5 (Sex Role Stereotyping and Prejudice) and article 16 (Marriage and Family Life) of the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) also show the complexity of religious and cultural traditions in a vast and multifaceted Indian society and to some extent an inability to address these issues comprehensively. I suggest that before implementing any law that may challenge the cultural stereotypes, members of the society should be prepared to abide by the law through education and their participation in their respective contexts. Since gender stereotypes are reinforced by the complex cultural and religious notions, all segments of the society must address these issues on political, academic and institutional level.

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