



Have the Power Equations Changed in the Rural Mindset? Gender Stereotypes Over Three Decades

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ABSTRACT

Culture distinctly separates the role of man and woman in the society. India which is the homeland of several tribes has ultimately turned the country into cultural plurality with different tribes practicing different belief system regarding gender stereotype with 90% of the population living in villages, and over 730 scheduled tribes notified under article 342 of the Indian constitution, it was felt very strongly by the researchers to explore the gender stereotype of the typical Indian male and female as perceived by the rural masses: The real India. With the country marching into the 21st century and the huge campaign of women empowerment, gender equity all around, it became all the more salient to explore whether the changes in power equation in the urban educated sector have a spillover effect on the less talked about and underrepresented rural males and females, over three decades.

The present research paper thus makes an attempt to see if the perception of the rural males and females have changed from nineties to twenty- twenty-four. The data of three studies on adult rural males and females in nineties has been compared with the data obtained in a study on a similar sample (N= 800). All studies centered on Uttar Pradesh (the largest state known for its diverse tribal communities in India).

In terms of the sample characteristics of illiteracy, the same tool of picture story test (Bhatnagar & Poptani, 1991) has been used in all the studies. What appears rather intriguing is that the mindset of the rural masses remains traditional over three decades. This study on the one hand, opens a window for further research on different tribes and states of India to explore their perception of gender stereotype. On the other hand, the present findings have a message for policy makers that for obtaining the goal of gender equality, we need to work towards exploring and changing the neural wiring of the masses creating zones of acceptance for gender equity and equality in place of gender bias.

Keywords: Gender Stereotype, Tribal Communities, Masculine Traits, Feminine Traits.

"At the end of the day, don't forget you are a mother, don't forget you are a wife, don't forget you are a daughter."

-Indra Nooyi

India imbibing multicultural ethos somewhere has sharp gender disparities, though these differences vary according to different regions. There are large and significant long standing gender gaps in economic resources, educational opportunities, earnings, access to employment and power status.

According to Oakley (1972) the concept of sex indicates biological differentiation between male and female. Gender on the other hand, refers to the social and cultural construction of masculinities and femininities. Gender pertains to the different social and cultural roles, expectations and constraints placed upon men and women by virtue of their sex. Gender stereotypes reflect essentialism, or the tendency to infer essences, often

taking the form of traits underlying individual behaviors (Prentice & Miller 2006). Gender Stereotypes are generalizations about what men and women are like. It may also be said that gender Stereotypes are beliefs about the psychological traits and characteristics and activities appropriate to men and women.

Gender role may be seen as the constellation of behavior as cultural prescription for males and females, which may include attitudes and emotions seen as fundamental to being a man or a woman. Throughout their life, people receive extensive information about women and men from direct observation through social sharing and cultural representations. As a result, most people acquire some version of their cultural gender stereotypes (Eagly et al 2019).

It is the cultural context which decides the socialization, and the programming of the cultural scripts, life scripts and gender scripts in terms of what is culturally appropriate. There are huge variations among cultures and therefore gender differences are also evident. Bhargava (1983) succinctly states Stereotyping has a long history, passed on from generation to generation, is culturally specific, highly crystallized, rigid and resistant to change."

Culture is the most significant social trait of civilization. A society's established culture dictates gender roles and relationships. India which is the homeland of several races has ultimately turned the country into a cultural plurality.

Casting a brief glance at the statistics, over 730 scheduled tribes have been notified under article 342 of the Indian constitution and 97% of them live in the Rural areas. At this point it would be in the goodness of fit to report that 70% of India's population still live in the villages with 22% to 24% of population living below poverty line. To add to this, India has the largest population of 287 million adult illiterates.

Thus, the context of such samples would be socially excluded/marginalized at multiple levels. What appears rather unfortunate is that despite constituting the large chunk of population, they remain under represented on empirical platform particularly psychological researches. Though work on social exclusion and Rural Psychology has picked up in last few decades with reference to gender stereotype. (Singh and Rajyalakshmi 1993, Srivastava and Bhatnagar 2000, Srivastava and Bhatnagar 2002, Singh 2007, Kumar Vivek 2009, Mishra, Behera and Babu 2012, Bhatnagar, Singh and Bharti 2013, Suma 2014, Chatterjee, Murgai and Rama 2015, Bhatnagar, Bharti, Singh and Gupta 2017, Waghachavare, Dhumale & Kadana 2021, Bhushan 2022).

Gender roles and relationships are not uniform across the country's tribal communities, but rather vary (Bhattacharya and Pal 2022). Despite the stupendous rate of social change, globalization and advancement in education, science and technology gender parity has not been achieved due to deep rooted gender stereotype. Gender discrimination precedes differential treatment as evident by the implementation of preconceptions and prenatal diagnostic techniques Act by the Govt. Of India to address the female foeticide and infanticide. India ranks 141 out of 142 nations and 2062 districts in the world that are categorized as gender critical. As a whole, the country ranks 127th on gender inequality index and 114th on gender gap in the world (kohli 2017).

The urban rural divide somewhere also reflects the wide gap in the belief system. For past few years, A number of schemes and projects are being launched for women empowerment in India. The success of such programs and schemes is not only contingent on constitutional improvisations, judicial and legal protection but most significantly it is determined by the blind compliance of the beneficiaries to their cultural prescriptions and mindsets.

In simple words the crux of the issue is to bring about a positive change in the belief system of the masses regarding how they are expected to behave, communicate and work (Prentice & Carranza 2002). For bringing about the attitude change, it is essential to first explore the state of art at the macro level, that is, the Rural belt and obtain the picture of the gender stereotype they carry in their neural wiring.

Most of the studies done on the Rural population and tribes with reference to gender stereotype fall under four major categories:

- A. Studies dealing with gender discrimination and state of women viz.** Singh and Rajyalakshmi (1993), Shrivastav and Bhatnagar (2000), Davar (2003), Singh (2007), Kumar Vivek (2009), Mohyuddin (2012), Suma (2014), kohli (2017), Shukla and Shukla (2021).
- B. Culture, Socialization and Government policies: viz.** Bhargav (1983), Pant (2014), Bhattacharya and Pal (2022)
- C. School performance and job sector viz.** Chatterjee (2015), Sikadar et al (2008), Mishra, Behera and Babu (2012), Waghachavare et al (2021)
- D. Assessment of Sex stereotype viz.:** Gupta 1999, Shrivastava & Bhatnagar 2002, Bhatnagar, Singh and Bharti 2013, Bhatnagar, Bharti, Singh 2017.

The need of the hour is to create equality and equity between the two genders for which the authors suggest a multi stage strategy as given below:

- (i) Assessment of the gender related prescriptions imbibed in the minds of the rural masses, tribes and various cultures on a common platform of assessment.
- (ii) Assimilation and synthesis of the similarity across the mindsets of various tribes identify the blockages, prohibitions and irrational beliefs for sex stereotypes internalized within.

- (iii) Develop an intervention to eliminate the blockages and prohibitions with allowers and permissions, replacing the irrational beliefs with rational beliefs tuned to present reality.
- (iv) A follow up of the state of art after six months or so to assess the efficacy of the intervention.

The present study is a small step in stage (i). Researches have shown evidence of the pervasive nature of cognitive, as well as, motivational functions of gender stereotypes. Gendered expectations strongly influence how we perceive and enact gender differences. Gender stereotypes reflect gendered role relations in society. Only when substantial number of men and women can be observed in a broader range of roles will our stereotypical associations change (Ellemers, 2018)

Method-

Though the pervasiveness of gender stereotype is what exists as a universal fact imbibed in the neural wiring of people some part of it is biologically determined and rest is contingent on the socialization process. What intrigued the researchers was the question has the changes in social structure, globalization, advent of science and technology over a period of last few decades percolated to the people living in the rural belt comprising of approximately 70% of India's population. Hence, an attempt was made to assess the gender stereotype of the rural illiterate males and females over a period of 3 decades.

Considering the fact that there has been a shift in the power equations in the urban area with more females entering into the male dominated areas, it was assumed that some changes may have also occurred in the various tribes represented largely by the rural population. Testing this proposition, the researchers made an effort to compare the data of three studies conducted in the decade of 90's (Mitra, 1992; Srivastava, 1999; Gupta, 1999) with another set of data collected in 2024.

Most research on the content and assessment of sex stereotype are typically labeled **communion** and **agency** (Diekmann and Eagly, 2000; Rucker, Williams and Best, 1990). However, considering the demographic profile of the multicultural rural masses most of whom are illiterates, it was thought by the researchers to use a tool which has an appealing appropriateness and comprehensibility to such marginalized groups. Hence Picture Story Test was used (Bhatnagar and Poptani, 1991).

Largely researches in India consist of small scale, studies of college undergraduates (Dhatt, 2022; Bhushan, 2022; Kawale and Maji, 2022; Waghachavare, Dhumale and Kadam, 2021; Bhardwaj and Mehta, 2017; Williams, Best Haque, Pandey and Verma, 1982).

These sampling limitations often compromise external validity especially the over- representation of college, students. There is a paucity of research focusing on the change in sex stereotype overtime. Few researches like Das, Mishra, Das and Das, (2022); Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufman and Sczesney, (2019); Campbell, et.al, (2004); Morgan, (1982); Frueh and McGhee, (1975) contribute and understanding of gender stereotype on a longitudinal plan or across two points of time. Whereas, the study by Eagly, et. al. (2019) directly makes an assessment of gender stereotype a cross- temporal Meta-analysis of U.S. Public opinion polls from 1946 to 2018.

Freuh and McGhee (1975) and later Morgan (1982) focused on a longitudinal study on Television and Adolescent's Sex role stereotypes on similar lines. Campbell, et. al. (2004) explored gender related cognition and behavior in a longitudinal study. Das, Mishra, Das and Das (2022) also explored perception of gender norms and sex typed cognitive abilities based on 'Young Lives Survey' among Indian adolescents living in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

Sample- As mentioned earlier the data of the present research paper takes into consideration two points of period 1990 and 2024. Hence comprises of two set of studies. The sample of the 90's (study I) has in its Gambit, three studies:

- (i) (Mitra, 1992) comprised of 78 adult construction laborers equally divided across gender. They all belonged to villages and had come to city in search of work
- (ii) (Srivastava, 1999) had the sample of 40 female farm labors of the village Kuriana in a district Lakhimpur Kheri.
- (iii) (Gupta, 1999) The sample comprised of 200 respondents who had a rural base and were now living in Lucknow with low Socio-economic status. They were engaged in semiskilled jobs as vendors, laborers carpenters, rickshaw pullers or house help. Thus, the total N of (i), (ii) and (iii) was 318.

The second set of current data (Study II) comprised of 800 adults equally distributed across gender from rural background. The sample was largely taken from Kanpur 'Dehat' (Akburpur, Anara, Alinagar, Baghpuri, Bhilai, Dargovan, Dubari, Garab, Kathigera, Khurrampur, Ajmat Nagar, Aarova and Jagdishpur).

At this point it would be relevant to mention that the sample of all the studies (Study I and II) not only constituted of adults from Rural base but most of them belonged to scheduled caste and hailed from Uttar Pradesh, the biggest state in India. At this point it would be appropriate to mention that total scheduled caste population in the state of Uttar Pradesh in Census 2011 is 4, 13, 57, 608. Since the basic aim of the researchers was to explore the perception of the masses- the rural inhabitants, comprising of various tribes, the two sets of

studies (Study I of Nineties and Study II of 2024) started with Uttar Pradesh. The samples were also matched in terms of education and age.

Tool- Since the sample of all the studies was illiterate, it was not possible to use the various existing scales. The Picture Story Test (Bhatnagar and Poptani, 1991) was used to explore the perception of sex stereotype. The development of Picture story Test focused initially on exploring the traits most representative of Indian masculinity and femininity through scanning of existing tools for measuring Sex Stereotype, content analysis of 25 Hindi novels, as well as, 3000 matrimonial advertisements, trait generation of typical Indian male and female and finally the responses by 500 subjects. Out of 96 traits having consensus, 44 traits which emerged most dominant across all these measures were selected for the Picture Story Test. Traits similar in meaning were clubbed together making it 32 items. 32 stories (16 based on masculine items & 16 based on feminine items) were made along with silhouettes of male and female figures. Presentation of each story was done along with the silhouette's figure. Within each group of 16 stimulus figures, the four positions of silhouettes were- Silhouettes facing each other, facing away from each other, both facing right and both facing left. The figures developed by Bhalla (Bhalla, 1991) had initially fourteen postures (dressed in Indian attire) out of which only four postures of standing, sitting, walking and showing movement were retained after ascertaining the neutrality of the postures by 25 respondents. The development of Picture Story Test was on the lines of Sex Stereotype Measure II (Williams and Best, 1990).

Administration- For the studies in the decade of 90's (Study I) the researchers approached the following units of sample:

(i) **Mittra, (1992) contacted Construction labor**

(ii) **Srivastava, (1999) contacted Female farm labor in Kuriana village**

(iii) **Gupta, (1999) contacted Vendors, Rickshaw pullers, maids etc. in their houses in Mavyaiya in Lucknow city**

For the study in 2024 (Study II) the second author contacted illiterate rural males and females from Kanpur Dehat. The administration of Picture story test in all study was done individually.

Since all the respondents were illiterate, responses given by them were recorded by the researchers. Each respondent was shown a picture and a story was read by the researcher. The respondent after listening to the story had to respond in terms of indicating the figure (among male and female silhouettes) the story is about.

Results-

Table 1: Demographic details of the sample

	Study I Studies in 1990		Total	Study II Study in 2024		Total
	RM	RF		RM	RF	
Participants	39+100= 139	39+40+100= 179	318	400	400	800
Average Age	32.5 years	32.5 years	32.5 years	32.5 years	32.5 years	32.5 years
Education	Illiterate	Illiterate	Illiterate	Illiterate	Illiterate	Illiterate

*RM- rural males, * RF-rural females

Table 2: Obtained means for the Study I and Study II

		Masculine Scale	Feminine Scale	Total scale
Study I	Studies in 1990's N=318	12.82	11.66	18.65
Study II	Study in 2024 N=800	13.67	12.71	20.02

Although there exists inconsistency in researchers on gender stereotype some findings suggest a change in traditional gender stereotypes (e.g. Duehr and Bono, 2006) others suggest no change (Haines, et.al., 2016). The results could differ often due to the assessment by different tools. The present study therefore uses the same tool for exploring the typical characteristics of Indian male and female over two points of time (Study I 1990's and study II 2024).

Table 1 reflects the demographic details of the respondents across two points of time i.e. Study I and Study II. The average age was 32.5 years for both. Similarly, with reference to educational level all the respondents had no knowledge of three R's (were illiterate).

Table 2 brings to fore the finding despite phenomenal social changes and advances in development, largely the traditional gender stereotype is persistent across three decades. In fact, as evident from the table the mean

scores for masculinity and femininity scale are somewhat higher in Study II (the present decade) than Study I (1990's).

Additional analysis was done to determine whether the respondent's knowledge of gender trait stereotypes was evenly distributed across all test items or some traits are perceived more stereotypically than others. This was accomplished by calculating the percentages for each trait for the two sets of studies with 60% as the cutting point. The results are given in Table 3.

Table 3- Dominant characteristics of Feminine and Masculine scales for the two studies

S. No.	Feminine Scale Traits	% of Study I	% of Study II	Trend
1.	Soft Spoken	91%	86.25%	↓
2.	Religious	89.03%	71%	↓
3.	Tolerant	88%	98.5%	↑
4.	Sacrificing	74.3%	66.4%	↓
5.	Homely	96%	94%	=
6.	Sympathetic and Soft Hearted	57%	94.5%	↑
7.	Loving and Caring	69.5%	84.5%	↑
8.	Emotional	93.07%	92%	=
9.	Weak and Delicate	89.33%	78%	↓
10.	Shy and Meek	90.33%	72%	↓
11.	Talkative	83.5%	94.87%	↑
12.	Submissive and Dependent	87.6%	68%	↓
13.	Worrying and Nervous	86.23%	93.25%	↑
14.	Adaptable	50.03%	74.25%	↑
15.	Domestic	96%	94%	=
16.	Considerate and Helping	56%	74.25%	↑
S. No.	Masculine Scale Traits	% of Study I	% of Study II	Trend
1.	Independent	90%	95.75%	↑
2.	Possessive	50%	93.12%	↑
3.	Powerful	93.17%	93.75%	=
4.	Courageous and Daring	93.5%	96.25%	↑
5.	Protective	93.5%	86.87%	↓
6.	Dominant and Commanding	95%	94.87%	=
7.	Ambitious and Enterprising	87%	99.62%	↑
8.	Humorous	66%	91.87%	↑
9.	Aggressive	83%	94.37%	↑
10.	Intelligent	75%	71%	↓
11.	Outspoken and Straight Forward	85.4%	97.62%	↑
12.	Making Decisions Easily	76.75%	92.62%	↑
13.	Strong and Robust	92.83%	96%	↑
14.	Competitive	89.5%	91%	↑
15.	Leadership and Takes Initiative	91.05%	96.25%	↑
16.	Rigid	86.75%	57.37%	↓

For the Feminine scale 14 out of 16 items emerged above 60% in Study I (1990's) while all 16 items emerged above 66% in study II (the lowest being 66%). For seven items of **Soft Spoken, Religious, Sacrificing, Weak and Delicate, Shy and Meek, Submissive and Dependent** there seems to be a marginal decrease. For almost an equal number of items of **Tolerant, Sympathetic and Soft Hearted, Loving and Caring, Talkative, Worrying and Nervous, Adaptable and Considerate and Helping** there seems to be an increase in these traits as characterization of typical Indian female. Interestingly the traditional gender stereotype of the females being **Homely (96% and 94%), Emotional (93% and 92%) and Domestic (96% and 94%)** almost maintain the same stance in perception of the rural males and females across three decades.

On the other hand, a glance at the masculine scale clearly brings out the fact that out of 16 items barring possessive 15 items emerge above the cutting point of 60% for Study I (1990's), similarly for Study II, that is, the present study barring Rigid 15 items emerge above 60%. Another important finding is close to 100% agreement (above 90%) among the respondents for certain traits as representative of Indian male. In Study I seven items are above 90% while in Study II 13 out of 16 items are above 90% showing greater amount of knowledge, as well as, traditionality in the respondents for masculine scale. On similar lines 11 items show an increase in the percentage from Study I to Study II.

What intrigued the researchers was that the perception of items like Protective, Intelligent and Rigid there was a decrease over three decades. Predominantly the Indian male is characterized by traits like **Independent**

(90%, 95.75%), Powerful (93%, 93%), Courageous and Daring (93.5%, 96.25%), Dominant and Commanding (95%, 94.87%), Strong and Robust (92.83%, 96%), Competitive (89.5%, 91%), having Leadership and Takes Initiative (91.05%, 96.25%).

Agency and Communality the two defining features of gender stereotype (Abele, et.al., 2008) which were also conceived as fundamental motivators of human behavior (Bakan, 1966) have been the popular focus of research on gender stereotype in the west during the last decade. Agency has also been referred to as ‘**masculinity**’, ‘**instrumentality**’ or ‘**competence**’ and communality has been referred to as ‘**communion**’, ‘**femininity**’, ‘**expressiveness**’ or ‘**warmth**’ (Hentschel, Heilman and Peus, 2019). When the present results are seen in this context the expressiveness and warmth is evident in a number of items of feminine scale viz. Loving and Caring, Soft Spoken, Sympathetic and Soft hearted, Adaptable and Emotional are close to the construct of communality. Similarly, Independent, Leadership and Taking Initiative, Making Decisions Easily, Powerful and Competitive falls close to the feature of agency. In a reanalysis of some of the data in terms of the five-factor model of personality, Williams, Satterwhite and Best, (1999) found male stereotype higher in extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience while the female stereotype was higher on agreeableness.

The present findings find some support from Williams and Best (1990) in the cross-cultural study of 30 different countries in which college students rated a list of 300 adjectives according to the extent to which each was more frequently associated with men or women. Among the six adjectives associated with males in all cultures were Adventurous, Dominant, Forceful, Independent, Masculine and Strong. The present study also found Independent, Dominant and Strong and Robust over a period of three decades. However, among the three feminine adjectives found most significant across cultures only Submissive figured in the present study. Though the mindsets of the rural adults hold to traditionality for both Indian males and females, the perceived image of the typical Indian female is more conventional and constricted somewhere on a ‘not ok’ life position with a gender bias across three decades in the present study.

In a typical patriarchal culture like India the woman is subservient and subordinate to man. She is seen more as a caregiver, domestic, as well as, sexual companion and in need of protection. Pant (2014) adds to this that the gender role of women associates them with competence, abilities and skills related to home and family but not with competencies required in education/ high occupation. The challenges they face in the male dominated world often makes them develop what has been called “Learned Helplessness”. Holding to the patriarchal mindset, only reinforces gender bias and gender inequality. According to Kohli (2017) the root cause of gender inequality in Indian society lies in its patriarchy.

The distinction between traditional beliefs and beliefs concerning equal opportunity and equal rights apply to all cultures, however, how strongly the mindsets hold traditionality in a water tight compartment varies. The findings of the present study provide a stimulating platform for future research particularly the exploration of these gender stereotypes in the various cultures and tribes in India. It is true that not all cultures hold the same views of what characteristics and patterns of behavior men and women should exhibit. In fact, Gibbons, Hamby and Dennis (2006) found in a cross-cultural review that no one gender distinction applied to all cultures. Thus, although the results of the present research maintain how a representative sample of the rural mindset of Uttar Pradesh sustain and maintain the gender stereotype over three decades, what the masses of rural population of other parts of India have in their mental representation about gender stereotype of the typical Indian male and female is yet to be explored.

The researchers want to move

FROM “What equality are they talking about? When having listed these differences, a value judgment is added, all male traits are adjudicated to be superior and female traits to be inferior. The conclusion drawn from this is therefore, the mainstream consciousness of the society should be the male stream consciousness and women’s consciousness should be subservient”-**Moitra, 1996,**

TO Obama B. former U.S. presidents’ contention that “The idea that when everybody is equal, we are all more free”.

This would be a long journey.....

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