

Humiliation in the Indian Context: Effectiveness of Zeitgeist to Inculcate Human Dignity

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Abstract

This paper outlines various psychosocial aspects and sources of humiliation-causing behaviors, as well as, the psychological impact on the humiliated individuals. The author presents various examples, from Indian history, that depict the worst kinds of humiliation forced unto people.

An eye opening example of Mahatma Gandhi demonstrates how a humiliating experience can challenge the state of a human mind. When in South Africa Gandhi was subjected to a humiliating incident that triggered an inner transformation in him, which in turn led to his fight against evils of the caste system and racism. This pure thought of counteracting humiliation shaped one of the world's greatest leaders and peace messengers. Inculcating human dignity in modern India is taking place due to: i) leaders like Gandhi, ii) concepts of equality, iii) education of girls, iv) entry of women into the work place, and v) awakening by television's educational series.

Aided by new technology, the present world is transforming tremendously. With this new spirit of time (Zeitgeist) there is an optimism that acts of humiliation will finally vanish from the lives of people. In the present age of knowledge and global awareness, technologically supported by connectivity, the role and power of press and media, we can combat a phenomenon like humiliation. This time-shift and *spirit of time* can change the perception of humiliated people and create a great response to fight with the evil. *This 'yielding psychology' of humiliation needs to be eradicated by inculcating respect, self dignity and trust in human values. Humiliation is a social evil and it must be fought at each individual, familial, communal, organizational, societal, national and international levels.* Through greater awareness and sensitivity it can and will be possible to counter the evil. Gestalt psychology offers such awareness techniques, which when applied properly can prove effective.

History is witness to numerous examples of humiliations all over the globe. At the same time there are evident examples of people fighting back the humiliation and recovering their wisdom, self worth, and empowerment. Humiliated people have often regained their respect and dignity with more strength and self-image than before. In many instances those people have become role models for others and have embraced dignity and self-respect by abandoning humiliation and other adversely related consequences of humiliation.

The Psychology of a Humiliated Person

A person who faces humiliation experiences a disturbance in his/her cognitive, emotional and social functioning. Many such persons are subjected to irreparable damage that threatens their psychological equilibrium. It is debasing, insulting, terrifying, and depression inducing. The personality of the humiliated person is dehumanized while the one who humiliates gets a feeling of control, power and to a great extent aggressive or tormentor kind of supremacy. The people who humiliate are devoid of humaneness, social sensitivity, or even a small fraction of empathy.

Some of the following symptoms are seen in the humiliated persons.

- Causing self-devaluation and extreme sense of rejection in mind and body
- Extreme sense of dejection and mistrust
- Feeling of worthlessness in one's personal life
- Sense of social isolation and dejection
- Getting pushed down to the underdog role
- Sense of being treated unfairly, with hostility and dejection
- Causing mental scars that may never disappear from the psyche

Humiliation Examples in the Indian Context

India is a country with a long history that has gone through numerous transformations over the years. The Indian caste system is one example of a humiliation inducing system that was perpetuated in India. In a way, the caste discrimination legitimized differential hierarchies of people. In one of the episodes of Mahabharata (a Sanskrit epic of ancient India) there is a highly shameful incidence of humiliation. In it, Pandavas loses heavily while gambling and finally also loses his wife, Daraupadi as a bet to Kaurvas. Here, the king Duryodhan takes a revenge (through extreme humiliation) by ordering to remove her clothing (*her sari*, an Indian dress usually about 6-7 meters long) in front of numerous people present in the king's palace. That, however, does not happen because Lord Krishna (God) mystically keeps on providing an infinite length of cloth and thus saves Daraupadi from shame and disgrace.

In the Indian context, the humiliation phenomenon can be seen in numerous situations. The caste system is one such example, wherein high class people look down to low caste people. It is also found in child labor, forced labor and female labor. Labor workers comprise a sector that often falls victim to humiliation, mainly because many laborers are illiterate and are often exploited from childhood. Many other instances of humiliation in India can be observed in dyadic pairs like: master and servant, teacher and student, boss and subordinate, police and criminals, non-caring young children and their old or helpless parents, and daughter-in-law and mother-in-laws among many. However, in the post-independence era the situation shows improvement. Still, from time to time one learns about such examples of humiliations in the social system of India.

One conclusion is clear: that humiliation creates bad psyche, revenge, disgust, hatred and very negative feelings. Humiliation is a widespread evil in societies and needs to be tackled like any other social evil.

The Caste System in India

The caste system, which has existed for thousands of years, has an unpleasant legitimacy in India. According to Gandhi, "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind." From his heart Gandhi was deeply opposed to such discrimination but did not believe in retaliation against the rich or the superior class of people. Such kind of socially, religiously and culturally approved system creates a quasi-legal structure for people, and eventually becomes an introjected reality for the people in such a culture.

This kind of culturally approved behavior is somewhat akin to German term, 'Schadenfreude' in which pleasure is derived from the misfortune of others. High caste people develop a psyche of superiority 'by birth' and thus other lower caste people have a justification to suffer and perpetually remain at those socially defined lower levels.

The people called 'untouchables' were so mistreated that they were not supposed to be touched by the higher caste people. They were sent to live at peripheral places at a distance from the main village or town. Such practices were so deeply ingrained in their psyche that from generation to generation it grew stronger, as there was never any kind of questioning, or rationality in judging such social inequality.

The most effective reform of the caste system was initiated by Gandhi and it showed very positive results. Even though it still remains a problem, its magnitude is far less from what it used to be. This also reflects that when a social reform is taken up with sincerity and great leadership then achieving its mission becomes possible.

Gandhian Philosophy

Mahatma Gandhi was a great human being. On the 70th birthday of Gandhi in 1939, Einstein said, 'A leader of his people, unsupported by any outward authority: a politician whose success rests not upon craft nor the mastery of technical devices, but simply on the convincing power of his personality, a victorious fighter who always scorned the use of force; a man of wisdom and humility, armed with resolve and inflexible consistency, who had devoted all his strength to the uplifting of his people and the betterment of their lot; a man who had confronted the brutality of Europe with the dignity of the simple human being, and thus at all times risen superior. *Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked on this earth.*'

Gandhi had a unique experience when he was a highly qualified barrister from England, practicing in South Africa. Once on a train in South Africa, during the times of Apartheid, Gandhi traveled in the first class. During his travel he was noticed by a white passenger who got furious that Gandhi, being a non-white, occupied the first class of the train. The passenger eventually succeeded in throwing Gandhi and his baggage off the train on a lonely railway station. A clipping of this incidence (from the film 'Gandhi') depicts this humiliating experience showing white peoples' hatred of Gandhi (or Indians) based on skin color discrimination. It is an eye opening example of humiliation as well as the way to counteract it. Gandhi said, 'It has always been a mystery to me how men can feel themselves honored by the humiliation of their fellow beings.' Gandhi learned a great lesson from this encounter which changed his way of thinking and urged him to take a strong resolve to fight against this kind of brutally unjust behavior.

The Impact of Social Reform Movements

Social reform movements are akin to renaissance because the mass awakening is often led by intellectuals of the contemporary times. They create a sense of awareness which goes with the spirit of time, the *Zeitgeist*. India has been a place of exceptionally notable scholars, thinkers, social reformers and genuinely concerned leaders attempting to restore the dignity of masses. Notable names apart from Gandhi include, Nehru, Rabindernath Tagore, Madan Mohan Malviya, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Satyajit Ray, Swami Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati, B R Ambedkar, Shahid Bhagat Singh, Mother Teresa among many more. These eminent people influenced populations, as well as, helped to a great extent in formulating policies that promoted dignity and which in turn allowed for the change in the mindset of the people.

Normally, such social changes are much harder to implement than technological changes. Positive social progress may appear even impossible, but with time, sustained will, rigorous efforts and strong leadership, social movements can create an atmosphere of change. Psyche change is a highly challenging act and all researches from the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology can contribute to this large mission.

The Role of the *Zeitgeist* and the Media

The will to promote change, sincerity and goal clarity help in bringing social change over a period of time – this is what we call *Zeitgeist*, or the spirit of time. Such powerful movements and the dynamic leadership roles played by these great persons can never go unclaimed in the history of social reform. At the same time the human spirit of time is influenced by the technology of the contemporary period.

Fortunately, we are witnessing tremendous mega-scaled technological revolutions that allow for any one thought to reach millions of people in a matter of seconds. In fact, it is amazing that despite so many technological advances many human miseries still remain. Knowledge dissemination is at its easiest and most convenient point in the history of mankind. In the Indian context the boom in mass media has helped in many ways. It spread the education and changed opinions regarding education of girls and caused a large rise in the employment of women.

The bitter experiences of two World Wars and the terrible wars in Vietnam, Iraq and other parts of the world indicate that it is time to be prudential and give up the insanity of war, tortures, humiliations and other atrocities on people, so that everybody all over the world can live a dignified life as intended by nature on this beautiful planet Earth called the *gايا*, the mother Earth.

Initiative to Combat Humiliations

Humiliation free societies have some unique feature. In India there are many things which changed after gaining independence and which have impacted the dignity of people. Some of these Indian experiences can be a viable model for others to learn from. The following factors were very powerful in promoting dignity for masses in the post-independent era of India.

- Getting freedom from the British Empire after a long struggle
- Voting rights for both genders from the age of eighteen

- Extensive education and job opportunities for women
- Equal rights for all Indians irrespective of caste, creed or region, or religion
- Providing more education seats and job opportunities for castes which were earlier on low social strata
- Media awareness in the form of educational programs with a focus of social justice and equity
- Rapid rise in education in far off places and rural pockets
- Spread of education through educational awareness
- Women are the best change agents for social reforms, because in their role as mother, wife, daughter, and sometimes an educator, they often have the maximum impact.
- Role of Indian cinema in highlighting oppressions and related happenings
- Ban on 'sati' system, in which a widow was supposed to burn herself with the pyre of her deceased husband
- Providing more opportunities for education and jobs especially to downtrodden women in rural and tribal areas
- Family focused soap operas with an objective of targeting specific social problems
- Empowerment and initiatives by socially sensitive Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in creating widespread awareness through media and press
- Trust in the new generation with a proper bridge between the previous and the current generations
- Creating Global Gestalt which will emphasize the large picture of humanity in which every person is looked upon as part and parcel of the total design of society.

Non-Democratic Societies Nurture Humiliation

When people have no freedom their thinking becomes more hostile and ungenerous. Such societies, which provide little or no freedom to their people, have high rates of violence, hatred and multiple social problems. This creates difficult life scenarios not only for the humiliated, but also for those who consider themselves superior to those they humiliate. Coercive societies create a fear psychosis. Over a period of time, such mentality causes the human mind to dull. Critical judgments are lost and humiliation sets in.

It is possible to tackle this huge problem when the spirit of democracy prevails and intellectual awakening takes place. Societies that have nearly hundred percent literacy levels show better configuration in terms of human dignity than societies with low levels of literacy. Democracy, thus, is a very essential ingredient in the fight against humiliation.

A renowned Indian genius, great scholar and Literature Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, conveyed a sense of human dignity in the following humane lines of wisdom:

*Where the mind is without fear
and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been
broken up into fragments by narrow
domestic walls;
Where words come out from
the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its*

*arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason
has not lost its way into the dreary
desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by
thee into ever-widening thought and
action...
Into that heaven of freedom, my
Father, let my country awake.*

What Tagore has written is truly applicable not only to India but to the whole world. In the twenty first century when human achievements in technology are mind boggling, it remains a pity that much of the inhabitants of planet Earth still live in humiliation.

It is a time to introspect ourselves, perform a true soul search, and be a part of this great movement to make the world free of humiliation. We, as a human race, have that unique quality but we must give a shape to it now. In the spirit of Gestalt Psychology, 'The power lies in the present moment.' Therefore, as global citizens it is our profound moral, social and cultural responsibility to create a world which is absolutely humiliation-free and give the right to everyone to live with dignity and self-respect, as Tagore says, '*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high.*' It is time to live this way and the spirit of time (Zeitgeist) pleasantly invites each human being to be in that spirit where the head is held high.
