
Shhhh... Listen! Do You Hear the Sound of Social Stigma?

Cheshta Arora

Special Educator and Family Therapist

Email : the.toss@outlook.com

Society says “Be yourself” and the moment we try to explore our individual selves the same society immediately corrects us by saying “No, not like this”. It's relatable, right? We are the members of the society yet the moment we paraphrase 'society', a hair-line difference starts to emerge between us and the society resulting in discrimination and blame. It seems that there exists a gap between the society and us. This attitude gives rise to a “we versus they” ideology which further exhibits a socioeconomic hierarchy in the society.

There have been numerous instances where society becomes an indispensable factor while taking important decisions of our lives. In some parts of India, it even starts much before the child is born. The discrimination includes but is not limited to gender discrimination. Society becomes the dominant variable in defining the rules of what to expect from others. The number of questions thrown at the decision maker are countless. The wide range of topics on which an individual is judged on daily basis other than sexual discrimination, fall under the umbrella terms like career, marriage, sexual preference, outer appearance, safety and gender specific roles, to name a few.

To dig deeper into it, let us frame some concerns of the society. “Do you know they are living in the live-in setup and don't wish to marry at all?; You know you should be married by now and have children, isn't your biological clock ticking?; Why can't you take a break from your career to be available for your family; You are a single parent, it will be tough; Are you on medications to overcome homosexuality; You shouldn't wear clothes which invite rape; Control your wife and be a man; Stop crying as boys don't cry; You are seeking professional help from the therapist, are you mentally unstable?”

We all have heard most of the above-mentioned statements at some point of our lives. Some of us may have been at the receiving ends as well. Are these merely statements? Is it appropriate to say that “Log kya kahenge” (what people might say) is our defining statement even in 21st century? The answer is NO. These are not just the statements said by some people around us, rather these monologues convey vital information about the about the collective mindset of the society. It depicts the deep-rooted beliefs, customs, taboos, myths and realities in the guise of cultural values and societal norms, which in today's scenario can also be known as social stigma. Understanding social stigma is simple because but we all have experienced it in varying degrees. We are the living examples of how these social stigmas put us into the typical closed box. Most of us fail to decipher the difference between social stigma and social norms. We get accustomed to hearing these utterances where everyone is free to give remarks on

what to do and what not to do. The painful truth is that we are at the giving as well as the receiving end of this conundrum. Therefore, it won't be wrong to say that social stigma engenders stereotypical behavior.

To decipher the precise meaning of social stigma, I am lending the words of Goffman (1963) who defined a stigma as an attribute, behavior, or reputation which is socially discrediting in a particular way: it causes an individual to be mentally classified by others in an undesirable, rejected stereotype rather than in an accepted, normal one. Cross (1991) and Williams (2005) are known for their insights on social stigma. These researchers have added that meanings inherent to social stigmas are nested within historical contexts, and their meanings can change over time. Overall, social stigma is the term utilized when a person's social, physical or mental condition influences other people's views of them or their behavior towards them. It can be rightly stated that stigma is not limited to the minorities, rather it originates and is practiced by people who think that they have power against others.

The idea of schooling the other person with one's own sense of right and wrong prevails in the society till date. We fail to understand that these belief systems evolve with time. On the contrary, we as a society are still struck with the same old perspective which at present do not serve the purpose of living happily. Our own fixated mind and world-view spread social stigmas in society. The heart-breaking state is that we have normalized social stigma. There exists a stigma to throw the family drama under the carpet to protect the family culture and honor. Further, there is stigma against seeking professional help as well as being labeled the black-sheep of the family.

Kounteya Sinha in his news article “Indians are a depressed lot: Report” wrote about the 2011 World Health Organization (WHO) sponsored study. The article mentions that approximately thirty-six percent of Indians suffer a Major Depressive Episode (MDE) during their lifetime while nine percent of Indians have an extended period of depression. The social pressure to be “normal”, causes people to shy away from seeking professional help, wherever required. In Indian context, the pressure to follow the old social perceptions as per the family culture is widely prevalent. It intersects the lines of gender, caste, religion, socio-economic class, and region. These societal pressures have time and again coaxed people's decisions. These social stigmas instilled fear of inviting judgement, gossip and drama amongst the vulnerable people. Alas! These oppressions and stigmas terminate the importance of psychological care needed by the emotionally unguarded person(s) in vulnerable situations. The tainted circumstances or the 'taboos' as we may call it, prevents many people in India from accessing mental health care irrespective of their educational background. It is important to mention here that stigma is not limited to mental health conditions. Sadly, the attitude of society towards cognitive issues tend to be more judgmental than the attitude towards seeking help for medical conditions. Social stigmas can also be related to other characteristics including gender, sexuality, race, religion, and culture.

Social stigmas are so deep rooted in society that it is difficult to escape from falling into its trap. As a society, we conveniently put the blame on our forefathers for sowing the seeds of social stigmas. We consider ourselves as the ones who have to bear the consequences of the social stigmas instilled by our ancestors. We visualize ourselves carrying the burden of being judged every now and then. We fall victim to the blame game but what is needed is introspection.

Let us put the spot light on the current situation in the world at present, where we are dealing and healing from coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The outbreak of COVID-19 produced a social stigma and discriminatory behavior towards individuals who have suffered from the disease and those who came in contact with the sufferers. The rippling effects of this social stigma is also faced by the social helpers like frontline workers, medical practitioners, police personnel, etc. If newspaper reports are to be believed then many of the people were forced to leave their houses in order to keep rest of the society safe from being infected by the COVID-19. The condition was so distressing that the family members who lost their loved ones in the battle against coronavirus disease COVID-19 were denied permission to perform the last rites. Ignoring the efforts of the social helpers to keep the society safe has resulted in drawing the line between the society and the social helpers. Customary segregation of those who are affected by COVID-19 further strengthens the stigma. People are aware of the social stigma experienced by those who are admitted due to the zip-lipped issues like HIV, AIDS, mental illness, leprosy, or tuberculosis but COVID-19 has stepped up the idea of seclusion for general public. It stigmatized the activities involving social gathering or even commuting on daily basis, which have otherwise been an integral part of our daily lives. The prevention of COVID-19 demands isolation, insulation and segregation. Hence, the pandemic forced us to practice exclusion. Terms such as social distancing, detention, seclusion, quarantine and isolation suddenly become a part of the household vocabulary. However, since a pandemic is much more than a clinical aspect, all these steps have their own social implications as well. Labeling took a heavy toll and became new fear for the people with COVID-19 symptoms. The social stigma associative with the affirmative report hung on the door of the house with any COVID-19 positive member, made people refrain from seeking help when needed. To overcome this, one major step taken by government was to stop putting the caution letter in front of the houses of the COVID-19 sufferers. The Government of India also issued an advisory, asking the citizens to refrain from stigmatizing any community or area and to be more responsible during a critical time like this. But is it only the responsibility of the government and the front liner workers? We - the society, are equally liable for fighting the pandemic and related stigma.

I again probe my readers about the role of each one of us in stigmatizing COVID-19. Shall we say that we are blame-worthy of the prevailing stigmas just like our forefathers? We as a society need to introspect to overcome the social stigmas to breathe in a socially inclusive society. Social stigma might threaten the basic structure based on which a society grows. In times like this, when “physical distancing” and “physical isolation” are much-required steps to keep oneself healthy, society must act together to stand against all things, be it COVID-19 stigma or other prevalent social stigmas, that

challenge the cohesiveness of our society. Promoting social inclusion and social protection, promotes the mental health and well-being among people is supreme. It lays a firm foundation within the society to manage adversity while sharing the burden and consequences of any psychological or psychiatric problems.

Research demonstrates that active participation in society and trust-worthy people around us, are key determinants of health and well being. The social inclusion can be considered as the vital prognosticators of health and well being of an individual who overcame any trauma in his/her life. Social inclusion gives a feeling of being socially accepted and the efficacy to be able to contribute to society in a meaningful way. This gives us a key to open the door for a judgement-free society, a society where moral policing is not the part of our daily lives. The call for inclusion has not only been the voice of academicians and activists but also the people who belong to the excluded communities notably from among the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities. The Indian government has welcomed inclusion, be it active participation in paralympics or working on to provide a barrier-free environment to the people with disabilities, further expanding it by the landmark judgement of lifting a colonial-era ban on gay sex in the year 2018.

In the present scenario, the time has arrived where we recognize the importance of overcoming social stigmas. It is the time to unravel the underlying human within our coating of caste, creed, religion, culture or any other dividing barrier. Life's important lessons are learnt during the worst times. We have already experienced the worst during pandemic and now it's the time to learn and move forward. We as a society need to learn the art of accepting one and all without passing judgments. We should inculcate the fact that each one has his/her own journey of life. It's time to bring the change in the society starting from us as an individual. Let us welcome the post COVID-19 era with the new outlook towards life where each one is respected for his or her decisions. Join hands to be the member of an inclusive society.

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