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“What will others say?”

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Our society’s most killing missile that prevents us from taking ownership of our lives is to wonder at every step what others will say.

Nandita, a highly educated, 24-year-old working woman, was telling me that her parents will not object to her possible love marriage. Yet they and close family members have overdosed her to be very conscious about whom to choose otherwise “What will people say?” Her core investigation of boys and the big dilemma that comes to her mind when she feels romantically inclined is, “What will others say?” She was expressing that by nature she will not go against her parents in choosing a boyfriend, which amounts to following a pre-determined pattern of who should be her ideal husband. In India’s contemporary situation, she explained in a matter-of-fact way, having an affair need not translate to marriage, an area that’s not under her control. Somehow she was realizing her inner emotional content is getting disturbed. She said she has time upto age 27, but her conversation became indifferent, “With all my restrictions, I may fail in a love marriage, so I have to depend on my parents to find me a bridegroom.”

While doing some research in an Indian village, a farmer’s son was saying their 2-acre land gives them Rs 50,000, while Rs 20,000 is spent on input costs. So with Rs 30,000 for the year it’s

impossible to run their 7-member family. Taking his own initiative, he bought a small motorbike and became a mobile barber going to people’s houses to earn money. This brings him nearly Rs 15,000 per month. But his relatives want to disassociate with him. Why? Because they are Brahmins and he’s defiling the family’s image by pursuing a lower caste job. I really appreciate this courageous spirit of today’s young generation not caring about what people say. After the research I went to his house and found the family living condition was quite comfortable with the money he brings in. He showed me his barber kit. His parents were despondent, wondering how they will marry him off to a Brahmin girl because his entrepreneurship is not acceptable in their community.

My own barrier was not so different. When Mr Jacques Gourdon, owner of the lithography printshop near Paris, very kindly offered me a sweeping job in 1974, I was totally shocked. It was unimaginable. I was from a Bengali bodhiya family. We were extremely poor in India, lived in a refugee colony. But how could I be a sweeper? I’d just arrived in France, knew no French, was penniless and without any job prospect. My growling stomach quickly won over my cultural blocks. I de-conditioned my Indian caste conscious baggage, and graciously accepted the job.

But more mental torture awaited me. My job entailed taking six big dustbins full of used ink cleaning cloth and papers out from my printshop to the road at the end of each working day. That immediately traumatized me. “What if someone saw me?” That this instant fear was ridiculous

did not occur to me then. Just imagine the kind of complex I was carrying in my head. Nobody knew me in France then, which Indian would see me or even wonder who I was? How can any acquaintance or neighbor from my Indian village ever know I was here that I had to be careful of, “What will they say?” But psychologically I was very disturbed. Lots of cars and buses ply on the main road, so every time I went outside the door with my dustbins, I used to hide my face to not be recognized as a sweeper in society

After some time, I discovered this anguish to be totally absurd when I found Mr Gourdon was respectfully presenting me to other artists who came to the printshop as a painter from Calcutta. He'd even promote my paintings so I could make some extra money. The artists who'd come to the printshop to make their lithographs never looked down at my sweeping work like we tend to do in India. That broke my whole misconception of what other people will think. I started to boldly say then that my occupation was a sweeper while I was a painter. My morale was boosted when fellow students at my Parisian art college appreciated that I worked hard to support my education and livelihood while undermining themselves that they were studying with their father's money. So I learnt that worrying about what others will say is the most indecent social education system in our country because it puts you in a cage you cannot break free from.

Just imagine, a cobbler in our country is considered the lowest caste “mochi.” I remember even in my poverty-stricken childhood, my grandmother never allowed me to touch the cobbler when he came to repair a broken sandal. After he left, the place he occupied was cleaned with water. Does it mean our cobbler has no chance of becoming a Christian Louboutin or Jimmy Choo, the celebrated shoe designers whose hand everyone wants to shake?

“Hats off to you! You don't care what others will say,” is what people in India often tell me about the bright, holiday colours I wear to work to meet top global corporate managers. Actually I started

wearing such colours in France to differentiate myself from the high-flying CEOs I had to mingle with, and didn't really pay heed to this habit. Until I recently met Nandita and discovered the gravity of the words, “What will people say?” The enveloping torment that society puts on people of a different caste and creed does not allow us to blossom to our full potential. I hope India's young generation will ignore such persecution of “What will others say?” and make their careers without boundary, achieve their love life without other's interference and create their livelihood in every domain with dignity.

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