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## UNVEILING INCEST AND CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AS TABOOS

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### ABSTRACT

Evolution is the fundamental factor on which the entire human race is based. In order to survive each and everything has to evolve from its initial phase and come out into something new and in a completely different form. Although the evolution process is inevitable but the fact is that the traces of history can always be ruled out from the existing scenario. Same is the case with the taboos which have their origin far back in the history of mankind but they can be traced even today in various social customs. Taboos have existed in different forms in every society, sometimes in the same form and at other times in the other form. Although there has been a tremendous growth of human race and there is no looking back from this point but in the process human race has faced many tabulations and violence at each and every step. The violence has been an integral part in social system and it has taken many different forms from time to time. Sexual violence against children is one of the most alarming challenges faced by the society these days. Child sexual abuse and Incest are considered to be taboos about which nobody wants to discuss and as a result it continues to hold a firm ground in the society. This paper has made an attempt to understand the origin of taboos and the politics behind the formation of taboos with special reference to Child sexual abuse and Incest.

**Key Words:** Totem, Taboos, Oedipus Complex, Incest, Child Sexual Abuse.

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### INTRODUCTION

Taboos have always been an essential part of the unabridged history of mankind in every part of the world. Even though there have been a lot of expansion and a sea change in the situation as a lot of development has come on to the surface but still the taboos hold a firm ground in the social life of every society. There are different elucidations apropos the origin of taboos and about how and from where did they have instigated. The archetypal anthropological argument is that the origin of taboos is a cultural experience. The

alternative explanation is psychoanalytical; emphasizing the strong subconscious prohibitions that pass through generations. The anthropological argument about the origin of taboos refers to the origin of taboos as a cultural experience. Taboos exist and appear in our society in many different forms and can be understood by a deep insight into various cultural practices prevalent in a society. The most common taboo which can be observed in almost every society is the sexual taboo. Sexual taboo refers to the kind of sexual behaviour that is viewed as unnatural, immoral and forbidden. For

example, sexual activity between the members of the same sex or odd sexual behaviour of any kind is considered a taboo. Some taboos which apply to human interactions include sex, nudity and bodily functions. Many of these taboos focus on human sexuality and in fact sexuality itself balances on the edge of taboo. Sexual practices such as inter-caste marriage, homosexuality, and incest are taboos in many cultures. The exposing of certain body parts such as ankles in the Victorian British Empire and women's faces in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan are also a form of taboo.

Steven Pinker, a renowned biologist, in his work *How the Mind Works* writes that "taboos originated from a hardwired repulsion of disease vectors in the case of dead or social bonding in the case of patricides" (185). This explanation did little to explain the multiplicity and richness of concept as it is found in practice or in its religious formulation. Sigmund Freud noticed a similarity between obsessive states and descriptions of taboo. This connection shows that taboos can be understood as a "psychological condition that prevails in the unconscious" and states that the only two universal taboos are that of incest and patricide which formed the eventual basis of modern society. Freud continues with this classic statement about taboos which are prohibitions of ancient antiquity and sometimes externally imposed upon a generation of primitive men. These prohibitions must have concerned activities towards which there was a strong inclination. Taboos must have persisted from generation to generation as a result of tradition transmitted through parental and social authority (Freud 85).

Sigmund Freud in his book *Totem and Taboo* has brought out the intimate relationship between totemism and taboo and has connected them with the history of religion. For his study, he took Australian aborigines as the subject of study. They were divided into small clans or groups which were named after their respective totem. Freud defines totem as "an animal (whether edible and harmless or dangerous and feared) and more rarely a plant or a natural phenomenon (such as rain or water), which stands in a peculiar relation to the whole clan" (54). Thus totem was like an ancestor of

a clan and it was a rule that nobody in the clan will kill or eat their totem. Marriages between the members of clans with same totem were prohibited as they were considered to be brothers and sisters. Thus, the totem of marriage between same clan and between brother and sisters became prohibited. The totem animal was considered to be the symbol of the clan so it became a rule to name the clan after its totem. Thus from here started the naming and differentiation of different clans and groups. Thus we can say that in case of totemism, the human groups are concerned with the non-human objects which are not worshipped.

The origin of taboos of killing the totem and incest, which are considered to be the fundamental taboos can be traced to the totemism myth. According to this myth, there was a mob of brothers who hated their father and took him as an obstacle to their desire for power and their sexual desires. These sexual desires were for their mother and other women whom their father possessed. They hated him for denying them to possess these desired women, but also at the same time also admired and loved him. So in order to fulfil their desire for these women, they killed their father out of hatred. But soon they were filled with remorse and they began to think that this could further lead to more of such instances of patricide within the family. "What had up to then been prevented by his actual existence was thenceforward prohibited by the sons themselves"(205). They withdrew their action by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father; and they renounced their claim on those possessed women. Thus they created killing of totem and incest as taboo, which are the two fundamental taboos of totemism. Connecting totemism to Oedipus Complex, Freud says:

If the totem animal is the father, then the two principal ordinances of totemism, the two taboo prohibitions which constitute its core - not to kill the totem and not to have sexual relations with a woman of the same totem - coincide in their content with the two crimes of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother, as well as with the two primal wishes of children, the insufficient repression or the re-awakening

of which forms the nucleus of perhaps every psychoneurosis. (192-193)

Thus, Freud analyses desire and repression as two chief forces behind the origin of taboos and both these are formative of the Oedipal Complex. Thus, the formation of incest taboo is connected with Oedipal Complex. So, for Freud, the incest taboo keeps the subject from doing objectionable things, but the original desires which they prohibit still exist. The origin of incest taboo was built on the tension on desire to possess mother and to kill father. The tabooed object is the object of desire as well as prohibition. As Freud puts "where there is a prohibition, there must be an underlying desire" (qtd. Polka 167). Thus Freud sees desire as the acting force behind the formulation of taboos. This prohibition of desires leads to the frustration of desires which in turn results in secret actions resulting in incest.

The discursive origin of taboos opines that all the taboos and social norms are function of power and discursive practices. According to Foucault, power works through discourses and discursive formations. The power of human sciences derives from knowledge. Foucault calls such a cluster of claims to knowledge a Discourse. A discourse is a loose structure of interconnected assumptions that makes knowledge possible. In his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, discourse has been defined as a large group of statements that belong to a single system of formation i.e. discursive formation (qtd. Bertens 120). A given discourse, for example, that of sexology in the nineteenth century, establishes a field, within which propositions about sexuality can be formulated. Such a discourse then produces claims to knowledge and it is these claims, which we accept, that give its power. There is then an intimate relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault focuses on the set of rules, the discursive formation, which govern a discourse. The concept of discourse is not about whether things exist, but about where meaning comes from. Foucault argues that since we can only have knowledge of things, it is discourse which produces knowledge.

There are many claims that the incest taboos are disappearing in complex societies. Incest

taboo is any cultural rule or norm that prohibits practices of sexual relations between relatives. All human cultures have norms regarding who is considered suitable and unsuitable as sexual or marriage partners. In many cultures, close relations within the family such as first cousins are preferred as sexual and marital partners, whereas outsiders are considered taboos (Bell 100). However, there are certain divergences which are present among different cultures about what kind of family relations are acceptable in marriage. Sometimes relations between members of particular groups are excluded, even when there does not exist any kind of definite family relations, while the members of other groups are accepted regardless of the existence of blood ties. Many cultures allow sexual and marital relations between aunts/uncles and nephews/nieces. Thus, there arises the question of the origin of incest taboo as a characteristic of several cultures.

Incest is sexual intercourse between individuals who are in certain relationships which are forbidden from any such activity. In every society there are rules prohibiting incestuous unions, both as to sexual intercourse and recognized marriage. The rules governing incest must be investigated in every society in order to understand the true nature of incest. The prohibition may be too narrow to include only one type of parent-child relationship or those within the basic family. The most common exercise is that unions with certain relatives only are considered to be incestuous.

The term 'Incest Taboo' in many different societies has made differences in what and who is essentially forbidden. Sexual abuse within the household has become acknowledged as a cause for public concern (Bell 2). The incest prohibition can be seen as a cultural concept which ascends as a result of a general human preference for group which differs from them. This arises because intermarriage between different groups is considered to build respected unions or associations which further increase the ability for both groups to flourish. Incest can be viewed as the greatest benefactor of child sexual abuse in the present day world. Child sexual abuse does not just gives the victim scars on his psyche and personality for the whole life but also

steals away everything an individual is worthy of being possessing. In order to curb the taboo on child sexual abuse there is a need to completely understand this practice and how it has been labelled as a taboo.

Child sexual abuse has been defined as "the involvement of dependent and immature children in sexual activities they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent" (Kempe 127). This abuse of children at the hands of adult individuals is a matter of great concern, but still it exists as a taboo in our society. It is still not considered to be ethical to speak about the abuse of children openly in front of society. This further aggravates the problem of child sex abuse, as the silence on the matter provides impetus to the offender, who further takes the advantage and the abuse of children continues without any fear of punishment. Sexual violence against children is the inducement of children to engage in any sexual activity of which they are completely unaware. In many cases they are not even aware of the abuse they are falling prey of. This violence can take both a physical and mental form.

Child sex abuse is considered as a taboo in our society. The main reason behind the taboo being attached to child sex abuse is that there is no open discussion about sexual matters within the family. Sometimes even when the victim raises voice against the abuse, then he or she is silenced by force not to tell anyone and forget about it. At other times the reporting of such abuses are considered to be mere fantasies created by them. Even when sometimes these cases finally come out in front of everybody, the victim himself / herself is made to be an offender. The accused clearly escapes from all the accusations as he is in the state of strong place in the family. "The victim is accused of creating fantasies, losing their minds, being delirious and other such things" (Ahuja 232). Hence the victim himself becomes the accused. If this abuse again takes place, they don't try to report it and accept it as they know the revelation would only bring pain and suffering to them. Due to this, the victim starts bottling up of his feelings and grows up as a frustrated individual. This leads to the devastation of the whole personality of the abused. They very

often grow up as frustrated, introvert individuals with low self-esteem.

A very large number of people feel that this problem of child sex abuse is a basically western problem. But the truth is that this child sexual abuse is more prevalent in the conservative societies where talking about sex in any way is still a taboo. There exists a certain kind of silence over the issue of sexual abuse which further strengthens its position as a taboo. The safest site for the offenders of child sexual abuse is present within the family as nobody raises the issue. Child sexual abuse can take place in many different forms such as in the form of child marriage which had been granted social sanction in the earlier times, but now it has been regarded as an offence against children. Although this has been declared as an offence, but it is still practiced in many parts of the country. Another form in which the large scale sexual abuse is practiced in the society is incest. Here children are sexually abused not by the strangers, but by the family members and close relatives, with whom children can easily confide.

The most common form of child sex abuse which proves to have most damaging influence on a child is Incest. Incest is that form of child sexual abuse offense where the offender is related to the child, either by blood or marriage or any close relation. This incest is usually between a child or adolescent and a related adult. "In a society such as ours, where the family is the most active site of sexuality, and where it is doubtless the exigencies of the latter which maintain and prolong its existence, incest occupies a central place" (Foucault 109). Thus, Foucault has rightly pointed out towards family as the chief arena where the cases of child sexual abuse are dwelling in our society. In the society where shame and tradition form the basis of whole societal set up, such incidences of incest are not raised. Most of the abusers are immediate family members or someone very close to the family or are related to the family in one way or the other in the form of family acquaintances and very few of them are completely strangers. The most-often reported form of incest is father–daughter and stepfather–daughter incest, with most of the remaining reports

consisting of mother/stepmother–daughter/son incest.

Sigmund Freud in his work *Totem and Taboo* takes Incest as primary of all the taboos present in the society. Freud places desire as the chief factor behind incest and child sex abuse. This desire for relationship when prohibited, leads to the secret relationship, as prohibition makes the desire much stronger. Freud has related this child sex abuse to hysteria mostly in girls. According to him, Oedipal complex is the reason behind the accusations of child sex abuse. As maximum cases of child abuse were reported by girl child, so Freud connected it to the fancy of father by these girls which was an outcome of the desire for parent of opposite sex i.e. Oedipal complex. This Oedipal complex is considered to be the root of the incest taboo. Thus Freud locates the prohibition of desire as the main acting force behind incest and child sex abuse.

Incest seems to have changed or be in the process of changing discourse within social science. It no longer finds its place as a social rule requiring explanation as to its origin and function, but has been identified as an abusive practice, located as a social problem to be uncovered and measured. (Bell 2)

Incest has changed its form and shape to a great extent. At first incest was not considered to be a social but as a personal problem which was related to an individual. As the discussions of this issue of incest have been initiated by the large scale participation of media on a social front, so this issue is no more confined to a limited space, but it has become an issue to be dealt within the society as a whole.

The main reason behind this practice of incest is the politics of silence which mediates among the institution of family which prohibits any sort of discussion regarding this matter. The main reason behind this silence is the fear of shame, fear of breaking up of family ties, fear of an individual who exercises power within the household and in many cases it is the ignorance on the part of victim who is not aware of his or her abuse. In the patriarchal society, the power lies in the hands of

males which form a big reason for the exploitation of small children. As the abuser in such cases is mostly at the position of power, so it becomes difficult to report such matters to anyone else.

#### Conclusion

Thus, Incest is not only a problem of a single individual or family, but a matter of concern for the whole society. Silence on this issue needs to be broken down and free discussion regarding it should be conducted not only inside the family, but also on a common front in the society. Social Media such as movies are playing a very pivotal role in bringing up this issue by breaking up the shackles of secrecy and silence. This issue of incest is now just limited to the family, but it has become a social problem which points towards the current situation and status of a society on a whole. This opening up in the matter of sexual abuse has deconstructed the notion of child sex abuse and incest as a taboo.

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