

The Symbols and Metaphors of Adolescent: An Interpretive Study on Growing up of Adolescent Boys in Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study has been explored the 'symbols and metaphors of male adolescent life stage and its interpretation in the rural socio-cultural context of Bangladesh'. Adolescent life stage of male is full of culturally attributed norms, values, rules and regulation which are operated through the culturally recognized symbols and metaphors but coherently meaningful in socio-cultural path ways. This is an interpretive study of male adolescent life stages which includes how cultural conceptions and practices integrate attributed symbols, metaphors and their meanings; the process how culture constructs, recognizes, constrains the emotional, biological, social, and cognitive and behavioral development of this life event of male adolescent. The addressing notions include metaphors and symbols of coherent and underlying meaning of future life of male adolescent in rural socio-cultural context. This is a qualitative study where FGD, KII, Case Study and informal interview techniques of data collection have been employed for collecting first hand data from the male adolescents and their guardians. This study has also been approached to the theoretical lens of psychological anthropology where individual life experiences of male adolescents and collective notions of culture are explored in rural perspective of Bangladesh. From the perspective of interpretive tradition of anthropology and the conceptual frames of psychology, this study narrates the ways how culture recognizes the growing up of male adolescent life event through their shared/cultural knowledge and how the individual male adolescent accepts, resists and constrains the culturally attributed notions. The cultural notions of male adolescent development and individual experiences of adolescent are dialectically interconnected where culture demands the attributed roles from the male adolescent, but individual adolescent boys feel pressure to mitigate such roles of culture and tries to fill the gap of identity between childhood and adulthood. Finally, this study claims that the male adolescent life event as an important sub cultural category which is operated through metaphors and symbols under the unified broad culture of human life.

Keywords: Adolescent; Bayashandhi; Culture; Male circumcision; Spermeche; Shangrha

Introduction

This paper has been explored on the interpretation of the symbols and metaphors of the life stage of adolescent boys in rural Bangladesh. Adolescent is a very contentious term and there is a differential meanings and implications in across to various culture. Even within a specific socio-cultural setting, adolescent bears multiple meanings to the policy makers, academicians, health practitioners and the community people. Some notions are more based on human biological determinism such as age, puberty, sexual orientation etc. Besides biological determinism, adolescent life stage is circulated by social and cultural practices [1] where economic, geophysical and another Lucie blend together. The biological determinism of addressing adolescent strictly provides less importance of social and cultural issues but adolescent must have to be considered as a social and cultural category rather than biological entity only because adolescent boys and girls have to be brought up through social constrains, opportunities and privileges. The gender-based [2] division between men and women begins during the adolescent time period and it is the main basis of human biological determinism but having social and cultural implications in large scale. First menarche for a girl and first spermeche for a boy are culturally considered as signs of growing up. Gender based norms and values and practices associate with the adolescent during such biological experiences.

Research Methodology

Theoretical and conceptual legacy of this study

The theoretical and conceptual legacy of this study has rooted from the critic of western psychobiological thought of adolescent growing up. The western psychobiological thought or understanding

of adolescent primarily is a preparatory stage for adulthood and it is the most potential crisis period which is brought by the clusters of uncertainties of the physical and social transitions between life stage [3]. Such western model of adolescent study explains this life stage as an individual product merely cultural than biological and psychological. "Adolescent in general as a period of individuation and crisis" [3]. The western psychobiological categorization of adolescent life stage also recognizes it as a universal category of life stage that neglects the socio-cultural and environmental realities where the adolescent is bringing up. Even the gender based differential experiences of adolescent brought up remains unidentified. Even though anthropologists for many years studied adolescent life stage primarily as a liminal period between childhood and adulthood marked in many cultures through the study of some types of initiation ceremony [4]. From such type of excavations by anthropologists, primarily emphasize that most of the rites of passage are at the control of the adult members and the community as a whole where the individual adolescent boy and girl do not have their own way of socialization and their cultural and social development as a part of human growing up. Such representation of anthropological literatures on adolescent study untouched that how

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the adolescents socialize themselves and under what familial, social, environmental and technological, and political backdrops where they go through. The traditional cultural notions of adolescent growing up give primacy of culture in human development and the prominent pioneer was Margaret Mead, the nearest student of founding father of four field anthropology, Franz Boas. In her study of 'Coming of Age in Samoa in the year 1928' [5], Mead pointed that adolescent is not passed with storm and stress rather it is the full of a period of maturing interest and activities [5]. Mead's notion on adolescent growing up in the perspective of Samoa society criticizes the western notion of adolescent growing up but it was not free from the blame of primacy of culture which is imposed on adolescent. Mead's contention is that adolescent is a part of culture and their personality builds through the notion of culture. Adolescent in many societies are bound to follow a set of taboos and restrictions through the cultural process of growing up. Here, Mead's notion of cultural primacy of adolescent growing up got legacy but fails to provide adolescents' negotiations, resistances against the cultural norms and values of their growing up due to societal and cultural change in both micro and macro societal perspective. So, cultural notion and procreation and the individual interactions of adolescent both influence each other. Here, the theoretical legacy roots from the making bridge between culture and the interaction of individual adolescent which is termed as interactionism. The study of adolescent growing up in the perspective of rural Bangladesh observes the complex interaction between the symbolic (knowledge, beliefs), psychic (cognition and perception), material (environment and technological determinants including mode of production, relations of production, mode of socialization). This form of interaction in adolescent growing up involves adolescent as individual agencies, having pragmatic-strategic ways to negotiate and recognize of interaction, actors of ruling and negotiating symbolization, agent of transformation of existing features. Applying this above theoretical and conceptual frame, 'the symbols and metaphors of adolescent life stage of adolescent boys in rural Bangladesh' has been interpreted.

A general description of study area and research methodology of this study

This is a qualitative study based on the first data from field collected by applying anthropological tools and techniques of data collection. For collecting primary data, this study has been conducted in a village of south-west Bangladesh named Kashimpur where 15 adolescent boys of age 10 to 19 years from different socio-economic background including school going, non-school going of migrants and non-migrant families and 15 adult men and women of socio-economic background were selected as respondents following purposive sampling methods. The data were collected by employing key informant interview, informal interview, case study, and focused group discussion among the mentioned respondents. Key informant interview was an important tool of data collection and from this technique; I was getting familiar with the field and the people of that village, first introduction with the adolescent boys and the adult men and women, the general ideas and nature of adolescent growing in that culture. After getting some general insights on the study topic from my key informant, I collected data from the individual adolescent boys through informal interview. During conducting informal interview, most of the adolescent individual boys felt shame to discuss and provide information and their experiences in that period. I represented myself as simple to them where I was listener and they were my masters. As a sincere student, I carefully heard their speech and for being easy I frequently discuss with them in various issues where they had curiosity such as the name of the

captain of Bangladesh National Cricket Team, their familiarity about the number one all-rounder in world Cricket, Shakib-al-Hasan. After collecting data from informal interview, I collected data from focused group discussion where total 15 adolescent boys were divided into three groups. FGD was an important method of data collection from that I got multiple interviews together. It was also an opportunity to get insights on the missing data during informal interview. Collecting data from the adolescent boys, I had conducted two FGDs among the adult men and women in that village. Each of the group was comprised in five individuals and all FGDs were moderated by me. For getting insights on the religious and other symbolic interpretations [6] on adolescent boys, I had interviewed a religious leader. Beside these, interviews taking from NGO worker and a government health official of Union Health Complex, provided government and non-government involvement in adolescent growing in the study area. The field data were recorded by note taking and analysed on the basis of domains analysis, content analysis and the form of thick description¹. Methodologically, this study is not a general explanation of the adolescent boys growing up in rural setting rather it is an interpretive study that discovers the meanings and its critical stance of symbols and metaphors associated with adolescent boys growing up in the studied culture.

Analysis and the interpretation of the findings

Adolescent is broadly identified as the social and psychological development category of human life span. It is western notion of categorizing of the life decade of human beings covers the age from 10 to 20 years ages. Etymologically, the word 'adolescent' comes from the Latin verb 'adolescere' which stands for 'the growing up' in English language. The modern psychological and scientific category of human growing up termed as adolescent differs from puberty. Puberty is the biological growth of human and it is the vast area of categorizing, interpreting areas of modern reproductive biology on the other hand adolescent is the social, psychological and cognitive development of human. Biological, social and psychological development of human are associated with symbols and metaphors which distinguish, categorize such human growth in cultural context. The cultural context means that every culture has some know how to define, identify, interpret, such life decade and human growing up like adolescent. Basing on field observation, this section represents the cultural interpretation of the growing of adolescent boys in village Kashimpur which includes how culture symbolizes, categorizes, distinguishes, manipulates and constrains adolescent growing up.

The concept of adolescent: Contradiction between Western and Bengali notion

The western notion of conceptualizing adolescent based on the scientific analysis and categorization differs from the Bengali notion. At the first stage while I was collecting data in field, a very few respondents were familiar with the term adolescent and even they were unknowable about the term 'boyasabdhi' which stands for the English word adolescent. Even the concept of growing up varies from person to person on the basis of their individual knowledge; participate in communal knowledge and shared or hegemonic process of engagement with western knowledge on adolescent. The villagers categorize and conceptualize the stages of human growing up on the basis of their cultural knowledge and the social and geographical resources what they shared as inherited process. The following table provides a comparative picture of the western notion and Bengali notion of conceptualizing adolescent.

¹Geertzian notion of analyzing ethnographic data

From the above table, it has been observed that there are some similarities and differences of the conceptualization of adolescent in western and Bengali notion to identify, categorize and characterize the broad life decade of human growing up termed as adolescent (Table 1).

Puberty, symbolism and the cultural interpretation of adolescent biological growth

As referred to earlier that puberty is the biological growth of adolescent boys and girls. During this period, the growth of human biological organs, objects associated with these and signs related to human biology are observed. Culture symbolizes those signs and put meanings to categorization and interpretation through the knowledge of cultural texts such as shared process of knowledge, beliefs and values associated to identify and analyse such signs and symbols of the growth of human body during puberty from individual boy to man and individual girl to woman.

"I have been told that I cannot behave like a child because there are some hairs around my secret organs and my face" – Rubel, A 13-year-old high school going boy.

Pubic hair, facial hair and body hair are the biological objects which bear the signs of growing up of a boy. Such changes of biological objects pursue an individual boy towards vast psychological and personality changes in the community and the social environment with the role's categorization and roles differentiation in day to day movement and activities in family and the other encompassing areas in society. The various meanings associated with such biological objects can be summarized in four ways. Firstly, someone is in the age of growing up if pubic, facial and body hair grows up in his body. Secondly, these are the symbols of psychological growing up also which means that an individual boy is experienced as constrains and manipulations of natural body and to control and maintain through the application of knowledge, beliefs, norms and values to regulate such biological objects. Thirdly, experiencing of the signs of such facial hair, pubic hair and body hair reminds the boys that their ages make a difference from the children who are yet to experience to understand, construct and abstraction of nature, social environment and day to day life events as an individual member of family, community and society in large-scale. The boys having such biological signs mean that they are getting closer to youth and adult to catch up diversified issues of natural and social worlds encompassing to them. Finally, such biological objects during puberty bears new identity for the individual adolescent boys and put them new roles in family, community and society rather than treated as child.

The cultural interpretation of spermeche and the growing up of adolescent boys

"When I had experienced first ejaculation of semen, I thought myself as the door of manhood" Nahid – A 14-year-adolescent boy.

Spermeche is a sign of biological growth of the boy to man.

Spermeche is the capability of production and ejaculation of sperm. The reproductive function of male body begins with the production of sperm. Observation from the field experience bears that the age of production of sperm for an individual boy is 12 to 14 years age usually. However, such biological capacity of adolescent boys demands new identity in family and community and they also claim themselves having reproductive roles and sexual life like the adult men in community. 'Autoerotic' behavior like the sexual behavior that is experienced alone is very common in this time period like erotic fantasies, masturbation and nocturnal orgasms or wet dreams. Wet dream is the process of releasing sperm during sleep resulted from erotic fantasies. The locales called the event of wet dream as 'shapnadash'.

The cultural notions and values are associated to put name, categorize, symbolize and ritualize such event of spermeche in the study area. Usually, the sign of ejaculation of semen means that boys are transmitting their ages from boy to man and in such situation, purity and pollution are also function as evaluative notion of such spermeche. As the studied populations were Muslim community, all boys know that ejaculation of sperm pollutes human body either masturbation, wet dreams or intercourse. People of this village believe that such pollution bears negative sign for the individual body, family and community. So, an individual adolescent and adult man need to be purified by taking the ritualistic bath what the commoners called it as the 'Faroz Goshol' which means the essential process of purifying body by Islamic religious ideology.

Male circumcision and the adolescent growing up

Male circumcision is widely practiced in most of the Islamic cultures. As all the villagers in Kashimpur are Muslim, they are also familiar with this ritual. Male circumcision is the process of the removal of foreskin of penis. Anthropology names it as the liminal phase of a boy to adult. However, the preparation of spermeche in Muslim culture [7] begins just after a few years of male circumcision. It is culturally accepted notion that implies a ritualistic tradition what anthropology terms this part of life as the 'rites of passage'. Initiation for boys is a way of crossing the border line between childhoods to boyhood. In locally, this form of ritual is known as musolmani or khatna. Khatna is a broad religious practice of the villagers to make their male child to adulthood. Khatna fills up the religious demand of the villager as well as it teaches the boys who experience this event that life is hard, and they need to be ritually adapted with such cultural notion of puberty.

Culture, stereotype gender-based classification and the growing up of adolescent boys

The gender-based classification of men and women started during adolescent period on the basis how culture think about human biological growth and the process of roles differentiation in family, Community and the social and natural world. The symbolic and metaphoric construction of manhood and womanhood are also imposed by culture to categories male and female biological differences and the roles what

Western Notion*	Bengali Notion*
Adolescent	Boyasandhi (Age between boyhood and adulthood)
Age of transition	Uthtibayos (Age of growing up)
Towards adulthood	Nabalak to sabalak (From boy to adult)
Ages of being man to boy	From chemrha to beta (From childhood to youth)
Age of rebellion, conflict and distress	Beporhoya bayos (Age of rules violation)

*The western notion of conceptualizing adolescent has been excavated from the various literatures on adolescent from western perspective.

*The Bengali notion draws from the context of the village Kashimpur.

Table 1: The Western and Bengali notion of adolescents.

they interplay in family and social life. The stereotyped gender-based classification of male and female consists of how cultural evaluation of human biological growth and social and psychological aspects matter to associate with such categorization of manhood and womanhood. The field observation experiences such distinction of male and female world on the basis of the human biological growth, the role differentiation in family and community as a whole, and other human behavioral aspects. Some of the notions of gender-based classifications with other roles associative are

1. *"The growth of female body is natural, but the body of male must be made; male has to do hard work (mayeder deho emnitei hoi but seleder deho toiri korte hoi; kothin kaj korte hoi)". Alim – A 24-year-old man.*
2. *"Usually it is normal for a female or child to be emotional, but male must be rational (maye manush ar baccader abegi hole chale kintu seleder abegi hole chale na)" – Rabeya – A 39-year-old woman.*
3. *"Tearing is unusual for a male in our society but normal for a female (amader somaje seleder kanna manaina kintu meyeder belai khub savabik)" – A 45-year-old man.*
4. *"Female needs to be polite in her behavior but male must be st at forward in speaking (purush manusher manmene hole chalena)" – A 35-year-old woman.*

From the above findings, it is highly notable that the stereotyped gender-based classification of men and women. Adolescent boys are taught and procreated such type of practicing during their growing up in the studied area.

Discussion

Social structure and its evaluation of adolescent behavior

"Society does not evaluate our behavior in well-mannered even parents do not understand what we want to say" – A statement of a group of adolescent boys in Kashimpur.

Social structures including parents with other family and kin members and the community impose a negative view of the biological growth of boys and their unconditional and changeable human behavior although all of them have to pass the same path ways of growing up from boys to adult men. During the adolescent period all the individual adolescent boys go through the turmoil and tensions to search for new identity in family, community because of their psychological and ideological changes with the growing up of biological changes. During such period, the adolescent boys feel pressure to mitigate the social norms and values and the new identity what they demand to adapt in social environment with the changes of their biological growth.

Usually, parents separate their bed from their boys just after the completion of circumcision ritual and in many times, they have some tendencies to reduce the close interaction to them. In such situation, such growing up boys goes through some troublesome conditions to procreate themselves and make cope up their life with biological changes during puberty and the social and psychological world of the adolescents. Their physiological, social and psychological growths are constrained and manipulated by the shared cultural tradition. The growing up adolescent boys feels shame to share their biological change with their parents and other elder members in the community because of the traditional normative values of culture. Many times, the growing up adolescent boys have to follow some restrictions to meet with the elders in the family and community because the elders feel pressure to

recognize the unpredictable personality changes, newer articulations of body, hair style and their high and destructive intentions towards new technological instruments like motorcycle, computer and androids cell phones etc. The social terminologies of abstracting such adolescent behaviors are 'balai, bachal, behaya, and beporhoya' which stands for negative evaluation of adolescent unpredictable behavioral conditions.

Shangrha as an informal organization of adolescent growing up for boys

Shangrha is the informal organization comprised by the adolescent boys and youth in the village Kashimpur. The term 'shangrha' is widely used by the parents and the elders in the community to represent the turmoil and unpredictable activities and gossiping by the adolescent boys in the different parts of this village including school playground, barren land beside the road side, river bank side, the front side of shop, masque etc. Every Shangrha is comprised at least four to five individual boys of same age. It is large part of the adolescent boys' leisure. It consists both school going and non-school going boys, but the main condition of this group is that the boys of this group must have to belong the same age grade. Although Shangrha is negatively evaluated by the elders, such type of gathering bears a wide range of meaningful and functional values to the adolescent boys of different socioeconomic backgrounds. The meaningful and functional values of Shangrha can be summarized as the followings;

1. Shangrha is the informal platform of gossiping organized by the adolescent boys of same age group.
2. It is the common ground of sharing knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and experiences of differential aspects of life including sex and sexual matters such as the experience of wet dreams, sexual orientation, and peer relationship experiences.
3. It is the way of resistance to the elder people's negative views of adolescent growing up where the elders set a rule and set of taboos to avoid the unpredictable condition of adolescent behaviour [8].
4. For school going adolescent, Shangrha is a place where they can share and learn the educational matters with the same age group.
5. For non-school going boys, Shangrha bears a vast role of learning and sharing knowledge in the working experiences of farming, fishing, playing etc.
6. Shangrha is not always go such above parallel evaluation rather sometimes it creates and motivates unpredictable condition such as conflict between the growing up boys.

Conclusion

Adolescent growing up is a broad category of the life event of human beings and this is a decade of life to become men from boys and women from girls which is preferably known as transition of life. Both biological sciences and social sciences can explain and interpret such growing up stage of such human population. Anthropological interpretation basing on the field work by collecting ethnographic data [9] can provide a holistic view of adolescent growing up where biological, psychological and cultural aspects can be integrated to explain adolescent. Taking in consideration of the physiological and psychological growth of the adolescent boys in the rural Bangladesh, this study has explored on the way how culture makes a orientation to categories, symbolize and ritualize such life decade. Through this study the author tries to interpret the social (relational) and cultural

(symbolic) milieus of the growing up of adolescent boys in the context of rural village in Bangladesh where the cultural notions of adolescent growing up has also been addressed and how the adolescent feel pressure to mitigate the culturally attributed demand and their ways of resistance against cultural notions. However, the distinguished nature of this study is that it tries to make a bridge between the broad culture of the people in this study area and the adolescents' own adaptive strategy to procreate themselves [10].

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