

A CAGE BROKEN: 'PINJRA TOD', A MOVEMENT IN PROGRESS

Namit Lepcha*

Abstract

The recent *Pinjra Tod* movement is a unique movement helmed by female students and sought to identify the presence of discriminatory norms in academic institutions and bridge the gender gap. The *Pinjra Tod* movement is a collective voice of female students, a protest against the unjust and discriminatory regulations for women in colleges or universities. The main issue has been a demand to ensure the freedom of movement within the campus and the need for assuring equal opportunity to access university amenities otherwise limited to male students. The *Pinjra Tod* literally translates into *break cage*, referring to the university's hostel as their cages. The protest was initially addressed against the regressive norms like curfew that restricted women's mobility and confined them within the high barbed walls of hostel in the name of security. The *Pinjra Tod* movement seems to be a normal protest to gain certain privileges viz. access to the library at night, a provision that should have been in place, otherwise by default. But the study of movement is significant in the sense that the protest is directly and indirectly against the age old patriarchal norms, traditions and practices/regulations that govern women. The present paper attempts to explore the broad meaning, the nature of the protest and significance of the movement taking into consideration the safety measures adopted and its impact on individual and society

Keywords:

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* **Assitant Professor, Department of Political Science, Alipurduar Mahila Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India**

1. Introduction

The economic reforms of the 1990s had a profound impact on political, economic as well as on socio-cultural aspects of the nation. In such a scenario, the issues central to women empowerment, viz. freedom, equal opportunity, personal preference, desire and choice began to take the centre stage. However, the infamous ‘Nirbhaya’ incident forced the Indian society to assess the situation prevailing on the ground and a thorough assessment found that the progress made in the field of women empowerment was partial at the best. Henceforth, a series of safety measures were initiated to ensure the security and safety of women. The Government on its part has claimed repeatedly that it has been honest in its intention regarding safety of women and several legislative measures in the recent years only attests such claims. However, these apparent noble Government initiatives have restricted women in many ways. In the name of security and safety, several restrictions were put indiscriminately on women and ‘suggestions’ were made to ensure that they do not venture outside at night, and were advised ‘proper’ dress code and were ‘asked’ to desist from speaking with strangers. Installation of CCTV surveillance facility in many places, increase in the number of police stations and increase in the number of women police were assured and implemented as progressive measures. But the close observation of such measures also warranted that women were being imprisoned with an array of rules and precautions, and these apparently progressive steps subsequently curbed women’s fundamental rights directly and indirectly.

The prevalence of moral policing and the culture of blaming the victim for any and every untoward incident have continued unfettered, notwithstanding the legislative and security measures. Recently students from Delhi University marched against such pejorative social mindset and protested against gender based discrimination on campus. In September 2015, female students from Jamia Millia Islamia were issued a regulation denying them entry to the hostel after 8pm. Female students were further perturbed when they found that no such norms were made obligatory for their male counterparts. These culminated in the commencement of a protest ‘*Pinjra Tod*’ against the discriminatory norms in the campus. ‘*Pinjra Tod*’ movement is therefore a collective voice of female students, a protest against the unjust and discriminatory regulations forced on women in colleges and universities. The main issue has been a demand to ensure the freedom of movement within the campus and the need for assuring equal opportunity

to access university amenities otherwise limited to male students. The nomenclature '*Pinjra Tod*' literally translates into '*break cage*' in English. Referring to university's hostel as their cages, the protest was initially addressed against the regressive norms viz. 'Curfew timing', that restricted women's mobility and confined them within the barbed walls of the hostels, in the name of security. Women wanted to break free from such unnecessary fetters that college or universities deliberately imposed on them. Delhi commission for women (DCW) issued a show-cause notice to the institution seeking an explanation of the reasons behind such regulations and also questioned if similar rules were implemented in Men's hostels. Encouraged by DCW initiatives, students from other universities viz. Ambedkar University, National Law University and Jawaharlal Nehru University also approached DCW about similar sexist rules in their institutions.¹ Soon '*Pinjra Tod*' movement spread to other universities across the country, in places like Patiala, Thiruvananthapuram, Raipur, Cuttack, Chennai, Aligarh etc. drawing more support. Many Students joined the movement and soon it metamorphosed into common platform for vindication of the rights of women where they could share their experiences and plight. It subsequently broadened the space and nature of the movement. '*Pinjra Tod*' also became a platform for vociferous protests against exuberant fee structure prevalent in most hostels for women, their stringent regulations viz. mandatory permission letters from parents and local guardians for special leave, moral policing and similar discriminatory rules etc.

2. Nature of protest

'*Pinjra Tod*' movement was a movement for basic rights viz access to the library at night, a provision that should have been in place otherwise by default. The protest has been characterized by vocal demonstrations, sloganeering and singing songs. Protests initially started by a handful of students soon turned to be a collective voice of female protest across Delhi and in rest of the country. They assembled for night protest in Delhi University demanding a rollback of the curfew time². Students associated with '*Pinjra Tod*' submitted their set of demands to the university administration. The main demands involved removal of curfew timing from all women's hostels, abolition of rules that required mandatory presence/ visit of local guardians etc. They demonstrated by shouting slogans or by riding buses at night, singing songs and demanding the locks at the gates of the hostels to be broken. The protesters came out on streets especially at night in the vicinity where several hostels were situated. They urged fellow students to break the

hostel locks and join the movement. Protesters broke their hostel entry timing rules and even stopped the traffic in some places. The activists associated with the '*Pinjra Tod*' movement organised a multi-city protest across the country. The significant aspect of the movement has been its efficient use of social media which succeeded to widen its support base. The social media played a significant role and continue to do so. All protests, demonstrations, views were documented and shared on social media, inspiring others students to join the movement. 'The Indian Express' reported, "Social media has functioned as a fertile platform for promoting such movements ensuring that they gain momentum across boundaries"³. Through organising street plays, placards, banners and postering '*Pinjra Tod*' exhorted women to unite for their rights and equal opportunity. They also urged women to free themselves from unnecessary restrictions placed on their freedom. Like any other movement, '*Pinjra Tod*' too faced censoring, primarily from university administration, police, several political outfits and even parents, as was observed by The Quint magazine⁴. Some members of '*Pinjra Tod*' even alleged that they were groped, manhandled and even threatened. They were also targeted and perverse remarks were hurled at them by random spectators.

The movement that started against the curfew rules in hostels, immediately succeeded to widen its horizon to address relevant issues viz. freedom, equal opportunity, gender discrimination, moral policing etc. They organised rallies to spread awareness about discriminatory rules within the institutional mechanism, perpetrating sexual harassment. '*Pinjra Tod*' movement emerged as a symbol, standing against institutional patriarchy and organised a simultaneous series of non-violent protests on the streets⁵. Among their several activities, the recent protest was against the long drawn custom of virgin worship in Hindu College on 14 February every year. According to protesters it was brahminical and patriarchal⁶. The demand for removing hostel curfew timings raised by students of Presidency College in Kolkata is the recent incident involving the voice against gender discrimination⁷. Protests against gender discrimination have been on the rise and the banner of '*Pinjra Tod*' has been an important platform for the same.

3. Significance of the movement

The study of '*Pinjra Tod*' movement is important because it was initiated by women themselves as a collective movement, for their own cause, for their right to freedom, equality, choices and

desire. The movement was helmed by female students, against the gender discrimination rampant in the academic spaces across the country.

The movement is important as it attempts to change the mindset of the people and the society in general. Traditionally women are viewed the weaker section who needs extra care and protection by men. The Indian society, deeply rooted in its regressive traditions, has regulated/controlled all aspects of the lives of women. The '*Pinjra Tod*' movement, started initially against hostel curfew timing in the universities soon broadened the context by questioning the patriarchal rationale behind formulating the 'safety measures'. Keeping women enclosed within the four walls of the house or hostel cannot be a solution. The effort of the movement has been to increase the presence of women in public spaces, even during the night, making secure access a right and not a privilege. For them, an increase in mobility of women in the public spaces, after sundown, should be encouraged and ensured, rather than making them 'invisible' through indiscriminate curfew. Common experience and study reports have proven that more incidents of assault on women take place inside the perceived 'safe zones', by familiar/known persons. The '*Pinjra Tod*' movement insisted upon the need to sincerely and urgently reconsider the state of women in the society and questioned the regressive social psyche.

Therefore, the movement is significant because it insisted upon the need for a continuous struggle against gender discrimination and challenged the patriarchal assumptions about the female body and female safety. '*Pinjra Tod*' has metamorphosed into being a vociferous campaign that claims to ensure a persisting battle against patriarchal and casteist structure, which constantly seek to regulate and control women's lives, sexuality and mobility through wide ranging mechanism. Women identify with the primary issues of freedom and safety. Thus, the movement ensures a broader perspective and context by widening its ambit to include other forms of oppression that operate in tandem with patriarchal exploitation. Uma Chakraborty observed, "they have localised the movement to reflect south Asian patriarchy which ties with the elements of caste, class and the politics of reproduction"⁸.

The movement contributed to the drastic shift of perspectives regarding women issues. It sought to identify the presence of discrimination within academic institutions, the areas hardly

recognised or observed as breeding grounds of inequality. ‘*Pinjra Tod*’ seeks to bridge the gendered gap that characterizes hostel rules for men and women in Indian colleges and universities

4. Conclusion

It has been evident that the safety and security measures that has been adopted are not progressive in their intent hence needs immediate rectification. These measures placed women behind the prison of visible and invisible rules and regulations instead of empowering them. The curtailment of the right of free movement of women cannot be considered as the ‘solution’. Institutional approaches to address the same should take into account the rights of women and frame guidelines accordingly. Social transformation would be possible only when women are allowed to break the unnecessary, restrictive fetters. Tarannum Siddiqui, Legal Expert in Gender Studies maintained, “The state needs to interfere and create an atmosphere where women can work and live freely as is their right. The debate and campaign for this is exactly what is needed because without it we will not move forward and spread awareness”⁹. The government should ensure the security and safety to all people without undermining others.

A need to change the attitude of people becomes inevitable to create an environment of equality. Along with elementary education, progressive moral education should be imparted to everyone since childhood. Men should be taught self discipline and they should be educated to ensure that they treat women as equals and not as mere objects. It is also quite necessary to inculcate in women a sense of self confidence and the feeling of security and safety.

Last but not the least, ‘*Pinjra Tod*’ succeeded in bringing in the public discourse the issues relevant for women viz. equal opportunity, freedom, individual choices and desires. The fight against discrimination has been long and it continues to be and the ‘*Pinjra Tod*’ has undoubtedly been a progressive move towards equality, freedom and dignity for women.

References

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