Challenges of Altering Social Equations

* Alcohol fuels violent masculinities
* Women shrink male bastions in media
* Farmer suicide as symbol of failed masculinity
* Women as commodities in era of globalisation
The session 'Masculinities: Coping With Change' held during the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 — Men and Boys for Gender Justice, organised in New Delhi from November 10-13, aimed to examine the intersection of the changing roles of men in family and society in a new socio-economic paradigm regarding men's self concept as well as relationships with women and other men and their actions. The session not only highlighted the problems, but also identified ways in which men are creatively coping with these changes and lessons we can all draw for our own work. The session was moderated by Mangesh Kulkarni from the University of Pune, India.

Dark Sides of the Changing Environment

Dr Vivek Benegal, a psychiatrist from India, spoke about the role of alcohol in the construction of masculinities. Drinking large amounts of alcohol is the quintessential male signature in India, where the macho motto is 'I drink, therefore, I am a man'.

Looking at changes since the last part of the 20th century, Dr Benegal said mobility and migration has resulted in young people in cities and rural areas becoming detached from family support leading to a loss of restraint regarding social norms in the new environment. "Earlier, there were certain things you could do and couldn't do in your hometown, whereas when you come out and stay somewhere else, all that is off and you can do so many things," he said.

"There is side by side increased competition, depleting resources, challenges for livelihoods and habitats and difficulties in relationships. Most of all in our shrinking rural-urban spaces, there is a difficulty in accessing leisure and positive stimulation. All this causes people to be in more and more threatening alien living and working spaces, which gives rise to a cluster of negative moods like frustration, anger, sadness, threat, and the worst of all, boredom. Along with this, there has been increased visible empowerment for women, changing roles, including that of individualism. "There is an absence of coherence, an absence of belonging and a growing sense of perceived skewed nature of the social order that things are not right," he said. Describing this state as anomic, Dr Benegal said this is characterised by the absence or erosion of norms and values. The deviance arises from the difficulties between society's social goals and the supply of legitimate means to achieve these goals. "So, what are the outcomes? In an individual, the mind seeks orders, structures and sense in these societies. So, you go out seeking a powerful leader, find purpose in groups, find someone to blame, you have to restore stability by enforcing or restoring power equations, and the targets are often foreigners and women. This has been seen in societies across different cultures," Dr Benegal said.

Role of alcohol in deprived masculinities

"So you have these drinking places in Bangalore and other cities because alcohol use has a lot of meanings for people," he said. "The first one is where men and women drink alcohol for different reasons and men and women drink alcohol differently. It has a shared expectancy, it is expected that people who drink will get disinhibited and violated; both men and women are expected, women much more so. There are expectations of the heightened sexuality attached to alcohol, the expectation of it being therapeutic, anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, and anti-boredom and there is this aspiration of value and normalisation of use that is occurring in Indian society vis-à-vis alcohol.

"The only four groups of people who traditionally drink, and are thought to drink, are the poor, primitive, privileged, and perverted. Any another drinking, outside these particular spaces, is seen as abnormal. The normal way of drinking by the Indian males, is to go, hide behind a liquor shop, open a bottle and finish 180 ml in two gulps, and then go and beat their wives and children, because this is expected, this is embedded in the way we construct alcohol in our social systems."

Assertive women enter male-dominated spaces in media

Barkha Dutt, consulting editor, NDTV, India, working as a professional journalist for two decades, started with notions of masculinity and femininity within her own profession. While no one would ever acknowledge that certain areas of news reporting are considered masculine and certain areas considered feminine, that hierarchy very much exists, and it is a
hierarchy because the masculine areas of reporting are the ones that occupy prime-time attention, she said. “Areas like covering wars, conflicts, politics, defence, military hardware, are without any doubt the masculine areas of news coverage.”

The feminine areas are stories of the oppressed and marginalised, caste discrimination and gender. “Now one of the interesting things happening which leaves male journalists trapped is that there is a movement of women into the masculine domain. But reverse migration, into areas normally regarded as softer news, has not happened. I know very few male journalists covering areas typically assigned to the feminine category,” Dutt said. “In a sense, the feminist discourse has opened up more opportunities for women -- I'm not saying that it's still not a misogynistic society in many ways -- but as women get more assertive, there are many more opportunities opening up for them, whereas there are not as many opportunities opening up for men,” she said.

Caught in gender trap in war zone

“When we talk about machoism in masculinity, perhaps there is no better association with it than of a soldier. It is considered the ultimate statement of masculinity. In this context, I want to share my own experience, which made me confront my own traps of femininity and masculinity.

“In 1999, I was in the frontline covering the Kargil war. I had theoretical assumptions of what soldiers are like, what bravery is all about and then I land up at Kargil and see that at the front are men younger than myself, and they were expected to lead this front against Pakistan without any sense of vulnerability. There was this one instance, when under heavy shelling we were pushed underground in a tiny bunker, and I was the only woman among 15 men. I developed intimate conversations regarding the army, and it is in this conversation that I actually discovered a soft side to these army men who were not allowed to display their vulnerability because they felt trapped and also loyal to their training. But then I also discovered that during this ultimate assertion of masculinity, you did have vulnerability which did not detract from the valour.

“But in their self image, they were frightened of admitting to the vulnerability because they felt that it took away from decades of training that put them as soldiers in the first place. We got quite attached, so when the time came to say goodbye, we found that all the male journalists and some soldiers were crying openly and the person who had difficulty crying was me because I felt that in the war front my femininity would be used against me. So I was very self-conscious about not being gendered in my responses and I found that men, because they didn’t feel that pressure, were able to cry openly.

“I feel that women themselves often are the worst perpetrators of celebrating these gender stereotypes. According to me, there is a problem when women give themselves the compliment of being compassionate, multi-tasking etc. because the moment you accept some gender stereotype, it is a corollary that some negative stereotypes are going to follow and you are also re-confirming that men in positions of power are different from women.”

Farmer suicides signify failed masculinity

RS Deshpande, a sociologist from India, spoke about the devastating drought in central India in 1972 and about masculinity and its implications or repercussions. Recalling the rural presence of masculinity during that calamity, Deshpande said, “The first thing I observed was the commodification of human beings in that drought. And this was done mainly by the people who wanted to save their 'prestige' in the village. In Solapur district, the wife of the deshmukh, a high echelon community, had to work on the fields, something that had never happened earlier. Not only were the household items sold but the children, especially girls were sold.

“Initially, the women of the house, then the girl or child of the house and then the baby of the house were sold. Distress gives rise to human perversions and one of the components of human perversions is masculinity.

In our studies we found that the farmer’s land was not transferred to his widow and many of them had to go to their parent’s houses.

When we look at suicides among the 132 families I visited for a study, one of the important things is that the man of the house commits suicide mainly because he would like to prove he is a man and cannot tolerate the humiliation of indebtedness. He inflicts the insult on his family, leaving them in the lurch.”
“I give you an interesting case. A retired army officer, a landowner and drunkard - the epitome of rural masculinity - was not receiving any pension so he started borrowing in order to cultivate and incurred huge debts. To cut his debts, he got a job for his wife. When the bank asked him to repay his debt, his wife had to borrow some money from her brother and gave it to the bank. After some time, the brother refused to lend them any more money. The wife then told the husband that if he considers himself a macho man, he has to pay off the debt. The army man then committed suicide.

“Most of the families I visited in rural areas have this problem of ill-founded masculinity that persists in these areas and one distressful feature of this is the commodification of human beings,” Deshpande said.

Globalisation and the commodification of women

Gail Omvedt, a sociologist from India, spoke about how changing economic relations and caste equations affect men and masculinities. With the growth of the capitalist mode of production and the changing nature of caste relations, caste jobs began to disintegrate as the labour power of all toiling castes became part of the generalisation of labour power of the commodities. Even while determining the value of labour, gender was the major factor. For the same kind of work, women labourers started getting lower wages than men. This signified the emergence of men labourers as head of the family where women’s freedom began decreasing while masculinity and male chauvinism started growing. The emergence of the new educated middle class among the lower castes increased the bloody confrontations in which the killings of young men from lower castes started becoming a new criminal way of caste domination, ensuring violent masculinity.

Imperialist globalisation further pushed women towards the ‘unorganised sector.’ With women resorting to taking up work as rag-pickers, contract labourers in building and construction and agricultural labourers, a new middle class of male chauvinistic and communal masculinity grew in urban areas. In rural areas, capitalist landlords combined some aspects of western capitalist culture to commodify women and their sexuality. Honour killings of young men and women falling in love with partners outside their caste, rapes and dowry killings became rampant. Modern masculinity revealed itself as the self-declared protectors of so-called ‘great culture and traditional historical establishment.’

Impact of liberalisation on working class economies

Datta Iswalkar, a trade unionist from India, spoke about the changes in family relations as a result of the closure of textile mills during the great strike in Mumbai in 1982. “When an industry shuts down, the consequence is faced by the family of the individual, including the education of the children. The second issue is the loss of employment of the woman of the household that was being managed on the salaries of both husband and wife,” Iswalkar said. In the Great Bombay Textile Strike in 1982, 100,000 people lost their jobs and had to find other employment opportunities like opening a vada pav snack stall. The girls had to work within the households because the mothers had to go out to work. “Another thing which we saw during the textile mill strike and fought for was the dues we were supposed to get after closure of the textile mills. Even in that fight, women workers were in the forefront,” Iswalkar said.

“This had a great impact on the government. The participation of women proved to be fruitful and many of our demands were met. Between 1992 and 2000, many factories were shut down due to the growth of the service sector. The main problem today, after globalisation, is how to remove the practice of contract labour as there is a fear of loss of jobs and no social security or job guarantee. Nowadays, due to technology, there is a decrease in the labour force. The challenge faced by the trade unions is about facing the new age of globalisation.”

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