

# Men Doing Feminism in India

## An Introduction

ROMIT CHOWDHURY, ZAID AL BASET

Aiming to bring critical attention to men's involvement in feminist social research in India, an introduction to a collection of essays on what it means to be a "man" and do "feminism."

In what ways can men ally with feminist initiatives such that the critical edge of feminism is enhanced and not blunted?

The current climate in which men's role in feminist social movements seems to have garnered much public attention and the, as yet, unwritten history of men's varied engagements with feminisms in Indian academia provide the political and theoretical provocation for this collection of articles. The intellectual field of research on women and gender in India has largely been a women's domain; historically the corpus of feminist literature in the region has had few male contributors. And yet, there have been some men in Indian higher education who have engaged with feminist thought and continue to employ feminist modes of inquiry in their academic and activist work.

This special issue aims to bring critical attention to men's involvement in feminist social research in India. To this end, we invited scholars who have researched problems of gender and sexuality to reflect on what it means to be a "man" and do "feminism." We urged them to consider two broad questions: (1) In what ways, if at all, is the sex of the knower epistemologically significant? (2) What part can men play in the production of feminist knowledge?

### An Apparent Contradiction

To speak of men practising feminist social research is to confront an apparent contradiction. As the principal beneficiaries of patriarchal arrangements, what motivates men's affiliations with a theoretical perspective which seeks to dismantle this system? The suspicion underlying such a query certainly does not indicate a mere jurisdictional dispute about Gender Studies as a field of inquiry. Feminist

struggles against gender inequalities have, at one level, been struggles against masculinist appropriation of critical voices. There is continuing need, therefore, to be alert to such tendencies in men's encounter with feminism, especially when men claim authorial roles.

Yet, what concerns us in this exposition is neither the question of epistemic ability—*can* men produce feminist scholarship—nor the normative question of *should* men do feminist research. In the four decades of the institutionalisation of Women's Studies in India and the gradual spread of feminist concerns to mainstream disciplines, we now have at least two generations of male scholars for whom feminism has been a major part of their formal intellectual training. For the few among them/us who choose to research problems of gender and sexuality, feminist insights are an organic component of their/our approach. The relationship of benefit that men as a class have with patriarchy means, however, that male researchers' use of feminism in the production of knowledge has particular dynamics of power. In this brief introduction we consider the epistemological implications of men's engagement in feminist research in India.

In addressing these concerns, we take as our point of departure debates within feminist standpoint theories. Standpoint theories challenge the apparent neutrality of scientific knowledge production and argue that it represents "a dominant, western, bourgeois, white supremacist, androcentric, heteronormative culture" (Harding 2004: 5). Two issues that have animated these debates and are particularly pertinent for our discussion are (a) social differences among women, and (b) the truth claims that accrue to marginal subject positions. Taking into account power differentials among women and acknowledging that one's account of one's experience is always already discursive required that the feminist standpoint be conceived as an achievement. As Sandra Harding explains, "A standpoint is not a perspective; it does not just flow spontaneously for the conditions of women's existence. It has to

We would like to thank guest editors Romit Chowdhury and Zaid Al Baset for putting together this special issue on "Men Doing Feminism."

Romit Chowdhury ([chowdhury.romit@gmail.com](mailto:chowdhury.romit@gmail.com)) is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore; Zaid Al Baset ([zaidalaset@gmail.com](mailto:zaidalaset@gmail.com)) teaches Sociology at St Xavier's College, Kolkata.

be wrestled out against the hegemonic dominant ideologies that structure the practices of daily life” (1998: 185).

If the feminist standpoint is neither a biological imperative nor an automatic entitlement of marginal social locations, we arrive at a space where, notionally, a case can be made for men doing feminism. Since the feminist standpoint is a theoretical location that is contingently achieved as an outcome of struggles against dominant thought, men who engage in such tussles may be able to produce anti-patriarchal knowledge. The question which immediately follows is: What provokes some men to undertake such struggles and comport with feminism? To answer this query, we require detailed historical and ethnographic research into men’s complex reactions to feminism in both their public and private lives.

However, two preliminary speculative responses could be that (a) abstract notions of justice and equality between genders, despite all their problems, remain crucial political provocations for men who espouse feminism in their research practice; and (b) men’s differential access to patriarchal dividends incites some men to connect their experiences of disadvantage with feminist insights into gender relations. In other words, male suffering can *potentially* provide inroads into modes of thinking which oppose patriarchal power.

### Achieving the Feminist Standpoint

What we are more interested in is to ask: What does men’s struggle to achieve the feminist standpoint entail? The feminist standpoint, fundamentally, involves the recognition of male privilege in social life. In attempting to ascertain how men may access this political and epistemological position, we need to query the experiential conditions which enable men to acknowledge this imbalance of power. To trace the trajectory of this struggle we need to first underscore that there exist power differentials among men. The strongest vectors of men’s disempowerment vis-à-vis the sex-gender system are sexuality and gender performance.

Failure to perform the hegemonic masculine ideal (and here we must note that

other bases of inequality such as class, caste, religion, and so forth, inflect this ideal in complex ways) can provoke different responses from men. The most seductive response to this marginalisation is to strive to achieve the hegemonic ideal, thereby entering the domain of “complicit masculinity” (Connell 1995: 79). Failure, when read as a failing, merely restates patriarchal understandings of gender and is, therefore, at variance with the feminist standpoint. In other words, when failure is understood and accepted in terms of the dominant expectations of gender, such interpretations remain restricted within patriarchal meaning systems. Failure may also impel men to question the social arrangement which concomitantly produces hegemonic gender ideals and multiple sites of oppression. The cognisance of failure may facilitate men to particularise their experiences, thereby exposing the ideological conceit of claims of universality.

So far, we have been trying to formulate ways in which men may approach the feminist standpoint by questioning their relationship to exalted patterns of masculinity. Gender, as we know, is a relational concept. It is, therefore, crucial to dwell on how this mode of questioning inflects men’s understanding of women’s lives. To what extent can embodied men’s representation of women distance itself from masculinist speech? Discussions around standpoints have demonstrated that social location bears in significant ways both on the knowledge claims that are made and how these are received. In this sense, any speech act, and particularly the act of speaking for others, is entrenched in circuits of power. In the evaluation of truth claims, there is a sense that privileged locations are discursively suspicious in that acts of representation by privileged groups often result in re-enforcing hierarchical social relations (Alcoff 1991).

Yet, it bears recall that while social location is certainly epistemologically salient, it does not determine meaning and truth in an absolute way (Alcoff 1991). Our concern, then, is: Under what conditions can men’s speech about women’s experiences become credible to feminist politics? We contend that the recognition

of experiences of male failure in the terms described above allows for a distinction to be drawn between men’s subject position as the beneficiaries of patriarchy and men’s political position which may approximate, in contingent ways, a feminist standpoint.

Again, we would like to stress that there is no inevitable transition from male failure to feminist consciousness. As Joan Scott (1991: 793) writes,

Experience can both confirm what is already known (we see what we have learned to see) and upset what has been taken for granted (when different meanings are in conflict we read just our vision to take account of the conflict or to resolve it—that is what is meant by ‘learning from experience,’ though not everyone learns the same lesson or learns it at the same time or in the same way).

In attempting to argue that some men who struggle with patriarchal codes can approximate a feminist standpoint, one is walking a thin line between anti-essentialism and the erasure of sex difference. In order to contend that men can access, understand, and write about women’s experience without the disavowal of sex difference, we use the paradigm of care-based epistemologies. Drawing specifically from Vrinda Dalmiya’s (2002) essay, “Why Should a Knower Care?,” we argue that caring as a mode of knowing may allow men to produce feminist knowledge about women’s lives.

### On Caring

For Dalmiya, “caring” includes five features. *Caring about* connotes a situation when “someone (the cared for) is important and matters to someone (the one caring),” “irrespective of properties that make the one cared for attention worthy” (2002: 35). *Caring for* requires that the one caring imaginatively and empathetically “simulate”/“pretend” the reality of the other, in order to act “in accordance with the point of view of the cared-for herself” (Dalmiya 2002: 37). *Taking care* is driven by the intention of doing “good,” which may not always coincide with the cared for’s expectation/desires from a given situation.

To ensure that caring does not become paternalistic or an instrument of control, it is necessary that the cared for acknowledges the involvement of the

one caring. This *care reception* makes caring a necessarily reciprocal relationship. Care reception ensures that the one caring works to understand the cared for in a manner that makes caring agreeable to her. *Caring for caring* itself implies that the one caring cares not simply for a particular person but for the relationship of caring itself. This allows the possibility of caring for those who the one caring may not find ideal/care-worthy or may simply dislike. More significantly, it marks a moment of self transformation, when the one caring confronts his own motivations or its lack for caring someone she dislikes or for the act of caring as such (Dalmiya 2002).

Caring knowing requires that caring be made an intellectual virtue along with “sight, hearing, memory, introspection, deduction and induction” (Dalmiya 2002: 42). Dalmiya notes

that the underlying motivation of caring—to make a particularised other important—maps unto the intellectual desire—to make cognitive contact with reality. Both entail a back grounding of the subject to create a space for the other—be it another person or the object of knowledge. The heart of the cognitive moment lies in selflessness (what is sometimes termed as ‘objectivity’)—where we along with our biases and expectations recede so that the object of knowledge can present itself. Reflection and inquiry are a constant examination of whether this submission to the object is complete (2002: 47).

What is the import of caring when men do feminism? As Naomi Scheman has reminded us, trustworthiness is an important dimension of processes of knowledge production. If a set of knowledge claims, the procedures by which one has arrived at them, cannot be trusted, they are unlikely to aid our endeavours at improving the world (referred to in Longino 2010). Caring, both as an intellectual virtue and an ethical project, seems to us to be a trustworthy way in which men can attempt to transcend the sex difference that makes men’s claim to a feminist standpoint dangerous and a collapse into androcentrism a probability.

It is by valuing women as women, as autonomous beings, and by interpreting male failure in the feminist terms described above that men may begin to understand and challenge “the conceptual

practices of power” that work in and through them to oppress women. It is in imaginatively and empathetically simulating the experiences of women that men can produce knowledge that does not colonise women’s voices. It is in the commitment to the “good” of women that men may learn to struggle against those other men and women whose expectations and desires mirror patriarchy. It is by struggling to achieve a feminist standpoint, by adopting the feminist framework, by entering into a self-othering dialogue with feminism that men may learn to care for women and to care for caring for them.

### Need for Empirical Discoveries

The dominant reaction of men to feminism within the Indian academy has been one of opposition. Such antagonism has been staged variously by trivialising feminist concerns, theories, and methodologies (Tellis 2001), resisting the institutionalisation of Women’s Studies in consonance with feminist goals, or using “gender” and “feminism” to merely re-energise tired mainstream disciplines, only to eclipse the political/theoretical lustre of feminist inquiry (Rege 2003). Such reactions need to be consistently exposed as acts of patriarchal power within universities. And yet, gathering more and more evidence of men’s animosity to feminism adds little to our conceptual understanding of either male privilege or possible avenues for radical change within Indian institutions of higher learning. Indeed, such a narrative is incapacitating in demonstrating the repeated failure of men and feminism to forge an alliance with each other. We feel, therefore, that there is need for empirical discoveries that will chronicle a different story, one of support between men and feminism.

Two arenas for such discoveries are Queer Studies and the Gay Rights Movement in India, which have witnessed tentative coalitions between gay men and feminism. The complex dynamics of this relationship between knower, known, and feminist traditions of critical thought, micro-histories of its ramifications in the domain of everyday interactions, remain undocumented.

Furthermore, have “heterosexual” male academics only opposed the pursuit of feminist goals within institutes of higher learning? We contend that it is more enabling to ask, instead: How did some men in the academy—in their various roles as teachers, researchers, administrative staff, and so on—support women feminist scholars as they began to call the lie on so-called general theory and research, and highlight sexual politics within university spaces? How did this supportive stance complicate such pro-feminist men’s relationship with patriarchal structures within universities, their colleagues and friends?

Answering these questions will, at one level, require that we embark on a “recovery project” to uncover a new gendered history of feminist studies in India. Such a venture, however, would not be in the nature of showcasing “positive male role models” within academia. Rather, it would be aimed at unearthing resources that could potentially provide fresh ground for feminist theorising about knowledge production in India by exploring questions about the responsibility of knowers, their relationships with objects of knowledge, and the power relations between different knowing subjects. The “optimism of the intellect” (Harvey 2000: 17) which underpins such a project appears to us to be vital at a time when, once again, a variety of politically suspect initiatives under the labels of “women’s rights” and “gender equality”—either led by or foregrounding men—are laying claims on behalf of “progressive change” in India.

### The Essays

Sanjay Srivastava’s (p 33) contribution to this venture tracks conversations between Masculinity Studies and academic feminisms in India. This takes the form not so much of a review of the field as it has developed in the region, but that of broader reflections on the likely theoretical yields for feminist studies from studying men’s lives. Srivastava identifies three social domains and demonstrates what an analytical focus on the production of masculinities in these areas of social life may add to feminist understandings of gender and sexuality. He also considers

the standpoints of male scholars of masculinity to explain the specific working of gendered power in the practice of knowledge. The task of “othering the self” which Srivastava lays out for the male researcher of gender is carried out, as it were, by the essays which follow, all of which use autobiographical elements to explore the question of men doing feminism.

Sibaji Bandyopadhyay’s (p 36) article reads *Manusamhitā* or “The Laws of Manu” as an elaborate vade mecum of misogyny, whose “advice” seems to be a template of masculinism, not just in pre-modern times, but in contemporary India as well. Significantly, Bandyopadhyay’s first encounter with this text, the feminist indignation he registers with it as a young male reader-critic, is conditioned by his vicarious experiences of abuse, meted out regularly to some women members of his family. His empathy with his women kin, and not his older male relatives who inflict this suffering, allows Bandyopadhyay to interpret “Manu” as a script of masculine domination that has to be opposed and not performed. And yet, the identification of feminist—or at least pro-women—sensibilities in himself provokes in the male reader anxieties of emasculation: does my empathy with women attest to my lack of masculine vigour? In doing the task of feminist criticism as a male reader-critic, Bandyopadhyay is compelled to pay attention to his sexual/textual body such that each act of interpretation requires that he negotiate the contrary pull between his desire for and discomfort with dominant expressions of masculinity.

Pushpesh Kumar (p 40), in his article, reflects on his experience as an ethnographer to suggest that male ethnographers can produce gender-sensitive ethnographies. He argues that it is the operation of “gender regimes” in academia which devalue information about women’s lives, and the absence of feminist training, that prevent male scholars from engaging with issues of gender in their fieldwork. He also contends that accessibility to women’s worlds can be negotiated more convincingly if male fieldworkers lay greater emphasis on “listening about” rather than “observing” women’s

worlds. In recounting his experiences of fieldwork in Kolam (Maharashtra), Kumar underscores the significance of establishing fictive kinship with women to document their lives in more intimate ways. In his autobiographical piece, Oishik Sircar (p 44) narrates his tryst with feminist legal studies to understand the implications of “conducting oneself as a feminist.” In doing so, he highlights both the possibilities and pitfalls of men “doing” feminism, particularly men from privileged social locations such as his (biological, practising heterosexual, married, elite, and upper caste). While acknowledging the role of men like S P Sathe and Upendra Baxi in contributing to struggles for gender justice, Sircar keenly interrogates the social conditions (of domestic labour) and inheritances (capital) that allow some men to become feminists and do feminism. Importantly, his essay goes beyond the issue of men doing feminist research to think about an ethics of responsibility that male feminists ought to reflexively embrace.

Social sciences in India have seen much debate on the associations between “the politics of experience and the ethics of theorising” (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 224). These contestations have been particularly fraught in the contexts of

caste and gender. The essays gathered here—which are part of a larger, ongoing collaborative research project on the conceptual problems raised in this special issue—explore this abiding concern with the politics of location and enunciation in the specific context of men and feminist knowledge production in India.

## REFERENCES

- Alcoff, Linda (1991): “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique*, Vol 20 (Winter 1991-1992), pp 5–32.
- Connell, R W (1995): *Masculinities*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dalmiya, Vrinda (2002): “Why Should a Knower Care?,” *Hypatia*, Vol 17, No 1, pp 34–52.
- Guru, Gopal and Sundar Sarukkai (2012): *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Harding, Sandra (1998): “Can Men Be Subjects of Feminist Thought?” *Men Doing Feminism*, Tom Digby (ed), New York and Oxon: Routledge, pp 171–96.
- (2004): “Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophical and Scientific Debate,” *The Feminist Standpoint Reader*, Sandra Harding (ed), New York: Routledge, pp 1–16.
- Harvey, David (2000): *Spaces of Hope*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Longino, Helen (2010): “Feminist Epistemology at *Hypatia’s* 25th Anniversary,” *Hypatia*, Vol 25, No 4, pp 733–41.
- Rege, Sharmila (2003): “Sociology and Gender Studies: The Story of the Crocodile and the Monkey,” *The Practice of Sociology*, Maitrayee Chaudhuri (ed), New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Scott, J W (1991): “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 17, No 4, pp 773–97.
- Tellis, Ashley (2001): “Resisting Feminism,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol 8, No 1, pp 117–19.

## Economic&amp;PoliticalWEEKLY

## EPW 5-Year CD-ROM 2004-08 on a Single Disk

The digital versions of *Economic and Political Weekly* for **2004, 2005, 2006, 2007** and **2008** are now available on a single disk. The **CD-ROM** contains the complete text of 261 issues published from 2004 to 2008 and comes equipped with a powerful search, tools to help organise research and utilities to make your browsing experience productive. The contents of the **CD-ROM** are organised as in the print edition, with articles laid out in individual sections in each issue.

With its easy-to-use features, the **CD-ROM** will be a convenient resource for social scientists, researchers and executives in government and non-government organisations, social and political activists, students, corporate and public sector executives and journalists.

Price for 5 year **CD-ROM** (in INDIA)

Individuals - Rs 1500

Institutions - Rs 2500

To order the **CD-ROM** send a bank draft payable at Mumbai in favour of *Economic and Political Weekly*.

Any queries please email: [circulation@epw.in](mailto:circulation@epw.in)

Circulation Manager,

**Economic and Political Weekly**

320-321, A to Z Industrial Estate, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg, Lower Parel, Mumbai 400 013, India