Synthesis of Discussions at the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014

Session: Borders and Bodies: The Fundamentalist Discourse in India
The Contemporary Construction of Masculinity Based on Religious Identity

*Examining assumption that women's bodies carry honour of the nation and community
*Political manipulation of the male anxiety to control women's sexuality and reproduction
  *Merging the ideas of protection of women and nation leads to legitimising violence against any 'other' that poses danger to them
*How social psyche of masculinity and its rhetoric articulate in everyday politics
The session 'Borders and Bodies: The Fundamentalist Discourse in India,' held during the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 — Men and Boys for Gender Justice, organised in New Delhi from November 10-13, looked at how women are seen as the repositories of male honour, and at how the borders of their communities are drawn upon their bodies, which serve as sites of violation or protection, while the male body must embody enough force to be equal to the task. Moderator Urvashi Butalia from India, a well known feminist, writer and publisher who is founder of Zubaan, said, "The partition of 1947 was the first moment in our history where one saw the mass rape of women on both sides of the border and the assumption that women’s bodies carry somehow the honour of the community, the honour of the nation, and the honour of religion. And that it is up to men to behave like men and protect women, and protection lies in either killing 'them' or in killing the children that they carry in their wombs so that somehow some kind of purity is maintained."

**How the Women’s Movement Relates to Religion and Fundamentalism**

Kavita Krishnan, All India Progressive Women's Association, India addressing the relationship of the women’s movement with issues of religion and fundamentalism, said, "The concerns of the women's movement are central, urgent and unavoidable, if one is to challenge Hindu majoritarian politics. If an inter-caste or inter-religious marriage happens, one intervenes and supports the couple. But there is coyness in saying in so many words that women—actually, anybody—have the right to love or marry who they please. This is true even more in villages than in urban spaces.

In the December 2012 movement, one of the popular slogans was women’s freedom. In discussions, village youth activists would argue: "Look, you could have raised this slogan in Delhi, but if we’re going to talk about women being free of their fathers and brothers in the village, who’s going to listen to us?" If they cannot do that, how will they confront the Hindu majoritarian right?

"The anxiety of controlling women's sexuality and reproduction is absolutely central to communities, castes and families everywhere. Political parties know that is the weak point, and that is precisely where they are going to hit; that is the anxiety they are going to play on."

Violence against women and rape of women is something which in recent times in India has been a source of great agitation; this response is something which we of course in the women’s movement have acknowledged, welcomed and responded to. But it is also something which the majority right has very much had its eye on and is manipulating and mobilising it in ways which have benefitted it.

At the Mahapanchayat in Bawana in north Delhi a few days ago, right-wing leaders said, “Nobody wants to riot. But the point is they attack our women, our mothers and sisters; then, what are we supposed to do?” The idea that a riot is actually a defence of women and women’s rights is an easy trope, an extremely handy, low-hanging fruit they can pluck and use whenever needed.

We need to think closely about how we have been framing our own movements. Have we been okay with the public response of mahilaon ki raksha, mahilaon ki suraksha (protection and safety of women)? It is not being understood in our feminist ways anymore; it is being understood and defined in a very different, aggressive way. Many things have been merged. The idea of protection of the cow (gau raksha), raksha (protection) of women and raksha (protection) of the nation, all those have been things that have been invoked in clashes in Delhi recently where the rumour that a cow had been killed was the occasion for instigating violence.

In the recent communal flareup in Trilokpuri in east Delhi, a Muslim boy was rumoured to have sexually harassed a Hindu Dalit girl. It does not matter whether it happened or not, because no one speaks to the woman, this is apparently to protect her privacy. In fact, however, those saying her privacy has been violated are the ones guilty of violating her privacy."
In a Manner of Speaking

It was pointed out that even the vocabulary we take on without always alerting ourselves to its misuse, such as the term 'honour killing,' helps to legitimise that men are bearers of the honour that lies in the bodies of women.

It makes me uneasy, because clearly it is not only the Hindu majoritarian right that is miraculously being able to do this. There is a wider shared space and system which easily enables this situation.

Recently, at Rajeev Chowk metro station in central Delhi three men of African origin supposedly sexually harassed a woman. There is absolutely no evidence, but the men came close to being lynched. Transgender people have been lynched in Delhi. The presumption is they have somehow violated public decency. It is always that ‘they’ are a danger to our women; that is how something is legitimised. ‘They’ could be women sex workers or transgenders.

So, we have failed to have a political imagination that challenges this enabling atmosphere. The question is: how do we respond?”

The Challenge Created by the Bogey of Love Jihad

Seema Misra, Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiative (AALI), Lucknow, India said that for the past 15 years they have been working on the issue of right to choice of sexual relationship. "We find that when women try breaking these barriers, they face a lot of violence, from being illegally detained to not being allowed to study, having criminal cases filed against their partners and them. The effort is to get the girl to change her statement and protect the honour. That becomes extremely difficult to deal with. The experience of AALI is that the bogey of religious conversion for marriage needs to be attacked.

"Women's rights groups have achieved a few gains in addressing issues of women's sexual autonomy and deciding whether they marry and who they marry, but the Love Jihad campaign has threatened these gains."

Grassroots women's groups have been finding it difficult to counter it and the discourse they are creating. The Love Jihad campaign has been limiting spaces and emboldening patriarchal and moralistic mindsets.

In Uttar Pradesh, a Muslim politician said there should be Hindu-Muslim unity, referring to the 16th century Mughal king Akbar's marriage to the Hindu Raput princess Jodha. A five-time BJP MLA replied, "Ab koi Jodha Akbar ke saath nahi jaayegi" (It won't happen any more)

This is merely one example of an inorganic issue being created and used repeatedly to polarise communities for political gain, and of what Kavita is saying is happening in Delhi. The notion of being emasculated—our girls are being taken away—has the media's attention and is really paying off.

There is no discourse on women's autonomy, agency, decision making, or on constitutional values. All our gains are constantly being reversed. At a meeting with lawyers I was asked: 'Why is it only Hindu girls are being preyed upon and trapped? Why don't Muslim girls marry Hindu boys?' Where is your evidence that they do not? But we're not going on evidence, like Kavita said, we're going on emotion."
TO IGNORE OR NOT TO IGNORE RELIGION?

When the new wave of the women’s movement started in India some decades ago and the issue of religion and religious fundamentalism came up, there was great discomfort among women’s activists about the whole issue of religion and how to deal with it. There was a big discussion about whether we should respond in the same language; whether one should engage with religion at all. From there we’ve seen the importance of an enabling framework being laid out for activists to deal with the dilemmas posed by all kinds of fundamentalisms and not necessarily only religious.

HOW TO COUNTER THE RISE OF THE NEW HINDU MAN

Akshay Khanna from the Institute of Development Studies, UK, said, “I will share some thoughts that are slowly coalescing into a paper. It’s called Ab Tak Chappan (56 so far). The larger title is Modi’s Body and the Social Psychology of a Political Economy. The title refers to two things. One is a 2007 film Ab Tak Chappan, which was about an encounter specialist in Bombay who had killed 56 people. The second reference is to a statement that Modi made in the run-up to the elections early this year saying that what India needs is his 56-inch chest, or the masculine, strong man.

Until Modi, there had not been one single leader that had risen above the law, politics, and the party and transcended the everydayness of our vulnerabilities. Modi transcended not simply politics but also the party and promoted the figure of the aggressive, masculine, new Hindu male who has a 56-inch chest. We need a nuanced and serious examination of how this happened.

How does this relate to the rise of the new Hindu man? So, what do we do? We need to focus on understanding how the rhetoric, the social psyche of masculinity articulates in terms of everyday political economy and development practices and in terms of development projects. Secondly, we need to emphasize that our challenge is the re-imagination of politics and that politics is not about the leader but about us.”