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Published: January 3, 2013 01:11 IST | Updated: January 9, 2013 10:41 IST

Taking the aggression out of masculinity

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CELEBRATING MANHOOD: Religious customs, such as Karva Chauth openly propagate male-worship. Photo: Rohit Jain Paras

The Indian family has been a long-standing site for reinforcing and perpetuating male privilege and entitlement

Sexual crimes derive from social attitudes and no serious effort at lessening their occurrence can ever depend upon cosmetic measures such as greater policing and calls for the death penalty. This is not to deny either the legitimacy of the anger over the terrible event that led to the recent rape and death of a young woman, or that the Indian justice system frequently subjects rape victims to as much trauma as the original act itself. Rather, that there is more urgent need than ever to think about the cultures of masculinity in India. While there have been good reasons why women's studies departments and many non-governmental organisations have been resistant to including a focus on masculinity as a way of understanding gender, the time is ripe for a change in this attitude. Now, more than ever, we require an understanding of masculine cultures that is informed by feminist methods and perspectives. Gender is always a relationship between women, men (and other genders) and unless we have a sense of how boys are socialised as men, our understanding of the ways in which gender oppression unfolds will always be incomplete.

Socially produced

Masculine cultures infuse all significant aspects of modern life and masculinity refers to the socially produced ways of being male. That is to say, men learn to be men and this "learning" is expressed both in terms of social structures as well as in the ways in which men present themselves in everyday life. So, for example, the idea of "men's work" and "women's work" relates to social structure whereas the ways in which men speak, behave, gesture, and interact with other men (as well as women) reflect the behavioural aspects of masculinity. Linked to this is the idea that some ways of being a man are better than others. These ideas about gender are produced at specific sites, and these might include educational systems, customary laws and regulations, the state and its mechanisms, the family, religious norms and sanctions, popular culture, and, the media.

Finally, in this context, it is important to remember that in all societies there exist multiple ways of being a man, but that certain aggressive models of masculinity become dominant. That is to say, masculinity is not just a relationship between men and women, but also between men. Some ways of being a man are considered more manly than others.

The notions of "making" and "producing" are crucial to the study of masculine identities, for they point to their historical and social nature. The various discourses of "proper" masculine behaviour — in novels, films, advertisements, for example — would be unnecessary if it was a naturally endowed characteristic. The very fact that masculinity must consistently be reinforced — "if you buy this motorcycle you'll be a real man" — says something about the tenuous and fragile nature of gender identities. It also suggests the possibility of foregrounding alternative models of masculinity.

Colonialism

A great deal of neglect of masculinity as an object of study lies in the celebratory ways in which we have tended to understand Indian nationalism which — in its reactions to colonial rule — produced a deeply masculine culture of modernity. So, if colonists sought to justify colonial rule by suggesting that Indians were not “manly enough” for either self-rule or rational thinking, nationalists simply inverted argument through providing “evidence” of Indian masculinity as well as “reforming” a number of social institutions to more closely reflect European ideas about “proper” families, intimacies, etc. Colonialism did not, of course, invent Indian masculinities, but it did help to cement and highlight certain regressive tendencies within it. Swami Vivekananda’s masculine photographic-pose was only one aspect of the cult of masculinity encouraged and tolerated by nationalism.

Beyond the historical context, masculine bias proliferates itself in a number of areas that have immediate bearing on everyday life. The masculinity of spaces and institutions is one of these. It has become commonplace to understand certain spaces and institutions (say, the street and Parliament) as public, and others (say, the home) as private. The terms “public” and “private” have, in turn, become linked to ideas about the “proper” realms for men and women. Women are tolerated in public spaces and within public institutions but are expected to behave “properly.” Otherwise they suffer ridicule and violence. The media quite often provides accounts of public women (say parliamentarians) through describing what they wear, or, how many children they have; women’s primary identity continues to be defined through an implicit understanding that public institutions possess (and should possess) a masculine identity. Our legal institutions just as frequently bring to bear masculine bias when dealing with gender-sensitive issues. It is not unusual, therefore, that while judges may express revulsion towards rape crimes, they may also say something like “what was this young woman doing at an ice-cream parlour at that time of the night?” The idea that women frequently contribute to their own ill-treatment through behaving in an “inappropriate” manner is part of the set of masculine attitudes that characterise a great deal of thinking on gender.

In schools

Schools are another site where masculine cultures are both produced and refined. Many of us too frequently make the simplistic assumption that there is a direct connection between girls’ education and women’s empowerment. The truth of the matter is that girls’ education continues to be seen through a masculinity lens: that educated girls will make better mothers, rather than that they might be able to exercise individual autonomy. If on the one hand, schooling can reinforce dominant notions regarding “appropriate” male and female behaviour, we need also to realise that formal education is an inadequate measure of women’s autonomy. We need to move away from masculine notions of the significance of educated women as good wives and mothers.

The family and religious customs are two other extremely significant contexts for the making of masculine cultures. The Indian family has been a long-standing site for reinforcing the most pernicious aspects of masculinity. Our family lives contain elaborate formal and informal means of reinforcing and celebrating male privilege. Sons are brought up to both perpetuate and condone gender hierarchies and are nurtured with a sense of entitlement.

It is this that lies at the heart of male violence towards women. Indian “family values” are contexts of a great deal of jingoistic celebrations about what is special about Indian society. Such jingoism keeps us from turning a critical eye towards what is genuinely rotten within one of the most basic units of social life. It keeps us from critically examining the masculine cultures that impact upon the relationship between genders. It is important for women and men to protest against the crime of rape. But, it is just as important to ask why such a large number of women have taken to celebrating the *Karva-Chauth* festival, and, why there has been no significant public examination of such rituals of male-worship.

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