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Masculinity and Challenges for Women in Indian Culture

By I. Sivakumar¹, K. Manimekalai²

Abstract

Construction of masculinity in India has been approached and studied from a variety of feminist perspectives. The feminist perspective focused on the discourse and gained much greater momentum during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. During the pre-independence era, the status of women in the areas of productive, reproductive, sexual health, mobility, and economic resources deteriorated to great extent owing to intense patriarchal oppression. Now in the post-colonial period sex-determination tests leading to the massacre of female fetuses, declining sex-ratio are unfavourable to women. Rapidly changing sex-ratios and increasing evidence of violence against women are the strong pointers that have justified the scrutiny of gender framework that defines how masculinities are constructed and manifested. Women behave in self-limiting ways not because they are socialized as females but because they are locked into a lack of decision-making power, invisibility, multiple roles in the gender injustice society. This article stresses the need for sustained efforts to increase the involvement of both men and women to remove socio-cultural barriers, stereotypical attitudes, and violence against women for creating a gender-balanced society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Violence, Theoretical analysis, Feminist perspectives, Indian women, Masculinity, Indian masculinity, patriarchy, Feminist psychoanalysis

Introduction

Indian society like a number of 'classical' societies is still patriarchal. Patriarchal values regulating sexuality, reproduction, and social productions are expressed through specific cultural metaphors. Overt rules prohibiting women from certain important specific activities and denying certain rights did exist. But the more subtle expression of patriarchy is through symbolism i.e., giving messages of the inferiority of women through legends that highlight the self-sacrificing, self-effacing pure image of women. It is also expressed through the ritual practices which day in and day out emphasize the role of women as faithful wives and devout mothers. Also, women are trained not to challenge discrimination, subordination, exploitation, and subjugation at various levels in the system. These norms restrict women from having aspirations beyond marriage. Similarly, for men, gender norms are constructed around masculinity and a man's sense of self hinges on his ability to control women. Until the daughter is married, her protection and chastity are considered as a mark of the father's honour and masculinity.

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A very large part of the thinking and writing about Indian men are confined to a narrow stratum with urban, middle-class bias. In the last few years, there have been a few book-length studies on various aspects of Indian masculinity that have used interdisciplinary approaches to the subject (Srivastava, 2004, 2007; Osella and Osella, 2006, Alterno and Mittapalli, 2009). Theorizing Indian masculinity is a challenging process. In a commonsensical sense, masculinity refers to characteristics or qualities which are considered typical or appropriate to a man. But how does an Indian man differ from others? Is it indeed even possible to make a distinction between the experiences of men in diverse societies that comprise our world, or is there one hegemonic male authority that we try to problematize? These are some of the questions that the researchers had to grapple with when trying to understand Indian masculinity.

According to commentators in the field of masculinity studies such as Brittan (1989), women's demands for freedom and equality have left men confused about their role. The dependent housewife model of the family is in decline and one of the questions that has come to haunt men is how they can prove their masculinity and superiority in these changing circumstances. Furthermore, sociologists such as Bradley (2013) suggest that the rise of feminism together with new models of masculinity have emerged in response to economic and cultural changes. Thus, the New Man, sometimes labeled the feminized man, replacing Connell's hegemonic masculinity has led to a moral panic about what it means to be a man at the beginning of the 21st century.

Research Objective and Question

This paper analyses various discourses involved in the construction of masculinity and various challenges faced by women in India. The main objective of this study is to explore the contributing factors that can be attributed to men's attitudes and behaviours on a wide range of issues as they relate to gender equality in Indian culture, based on the available secondary data. Indian men growing up in the eighties and nineties of the 20th century have grown up seeing a particular form of patriarchal masculinity that is being challenged in contemporary times. So, is masculinity in crisis? Most certainly it would appear that masculinity is in a period of flux, with the definition of what a man is and how he is to behave being uncertain. What is more certainly true is that masculinity as it has played out in the last few hundred years is being challenged.

Psychoanalysis and Masculinity

Psychoanalytic feminists extend their analysis of patriarchy beyond the conscious level of experience to the unconscious level where gender-specific desires and meanings are constituted. The representations of patriarchal behaviour are traced back to crucial moments of the psychological developments in the individual. In these moments, dilemmas of desire and identity arise and get resolved in different ways depending on individual, cultural, and social factors. For some, these moments centre on the dual mother-child relationship whereas for others these moments centre on the triangular relationship of mother-child-father. In all these, both sons and daughters try to extricate themselves from their mother's desire to gain their identity with the father who represents power and authority. The sons easily enter into the male world of power and authority through psychological reconciliations with the mother-figure. It is different in the

case of daughters who compensate for their failure to be like the father through adopting ways and means to be desired by men.

Pre-Colonial Period and Masculinity

India is rich in cultural heritage and natural resources. Women in India, during the Vedic period, enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life. The great ancient Indian saints Patanjali and Katayana reported that women were educated and married at a mature age, further they had the freedom to select their husbands. During the Medieval period women's position in society deteriorated because of the invasion of Aryans and Mughals. Indian women were forced to adopt the alien culture. During this period women were treated as secondary citizens because the patriarchal system was powerful.

In India, our knowledge of the past ultimately ended in the creation of persuasive rhetoric shared by Hindu liberals and conservatives alike, especially concerning the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood as located in the Vedic period. This image fore-grounded the Aryan women as the only object of historical concern, leaving the Vedic *dasi* to remain captured, subjugated, and enslaved by the conquering Aryans. The Vedic *dasi* was also a part of ancient Indian society; however, she disappeared, leaving out any trace of herself in the Nineteenth-century history. No one mourned her disappearance, but then no one noticed her presence too. Pandita Ramabai (1889) who was a champion of women's rights in the nineteenth century draws an insightful account of the actual status of women in high caste households by giving an autobiographical account of a widow of the glorious "golden age".

Colonial Period and Masculinity

Various discourses which addressed the question of women's position disagree on the sources of women's oppression and ways to end it. One group included colonial administrators, missionaries, ideologists, and other Western observers in India, while the other group consisted of Indian social reformers, politicians, and academicians. Although their interests were different, they tended to share a belief in the superiority of the Civilization of Westernized Christian nations over others. Some of them were scholars of Indian philosophy and literary texts while others had a Western education and were influenced by liberalism. In 1927, an American journalist Katherine Mayo drew a gory picture in her book *Modern India*. This book is remarkable for its frank and blatant racism in condemning Indian culture and traditions. James Mill equated the level of civilization of a country with its treatment of women. Thus, imperialism formed one context in which male discourse concerned the prospect of reforming the situation of Indian women.

Beginning in the second century B.C., India witnessed a series of invasions from outsiders, though some went back after looting, arson and carnage, a few settled in India. Most importantly the Moghuls who entered the sub-continent from the North West brought a new religion and new way of organizing power relations. Though some rulers carried out forcible conversions, many of them did not alter the social fabric of the society. The British, while pursuing commercial aims, also intruded into the domain of the private life of Indians. They explained their actions were "clear, precise, instrumentalist, technical, scientific, true and above all beneficial to all who came into contact with it"(Kaviraj, 1994).

Post-independence and Masculinity

After independence, the Constitution of India accepted the principle of equality of both the sexes. The preamble spoke of the equality of status and opportunity in the social, economic, and political realm. Various laws addressed the issues of violence against women particularly the Uniform Civil Code, Dowry deaths, Rape, and Health issues. The Government on its part brought several amendments to the existing laws after every popular agitation by the feminists.

Sex Ratio and Masculinity

The high masculine sex ratios of the Indian population have been a matter of concern for many decades. Considerable attention has been paid to different dimensions of female deficits in India and persisting regional variations (Sen 1990; Agnihotri 2000; Dasgupta & Bhat 1995; Miller 1981 & 1989) since the numerical imbalances between the male and female sexes were pointed out in the seventies (Visaria 1971; Natarajan 1972). The results of the 2011 Census have set off further debate on the issue and have narrowed down the focus to the changes in the juvenile or child sex ratio. Changes in the sex ratio of children, aged 0-6 years, are better indicators of the status of girl children in the South Asian environment known to be more hostile to females at an early age. It also reflects the total of intra-household gender relations.

Socialization, Internalization, and Masculinity

Masculinity is not a unitary and monolithic construct. It is shaped by socio-cultural forces like caste/race, class, urban-rural divide, geopolitical divisions, family, and other environmental factors. However, certain common trends are visible across all cultures, owing to all-pervading patriarchy. Gender discrimination in various forms is promoted in the family through the process of socialization. Playing with dolls, helping mother - sister in the kitchen or household work are projected as not a man's arena and boys who resort to them are labeled as 'effeminate' not only by elderly men but also by peer group members. From a younger age, boys are taught that expressing sorrow/crying is not a trait of real men. The male child is conditioned not to express normal human feelings like fear, or sorrow and that is why the male mind has to banish the feelings of tenderness, rectitude, sensitivity from his mindset, and create defensive armour of audacity emanating estrangement, and loneliness. There begins his search for power and control to feel a sense of security. The race for power leads to the vicious circle of the inability to develop human relationships and then not realizing their worth.

Pantelides et al. (1995) in their study indicated that most girls have measurably less leisure time than boys. Gore M.S. (1977) in his psycho-social studies on child-rearing in Indian families has shown that one of the ways to inculcate gender-specific expectations is the clear sexual division of work allotted to boys and girls. Gender stereotypes of submissive females and powerful males may restrict access to health information, hinder communication, and encourage risky behaviour among women. Ultimately, they increase vulnerability to sexual health threats such as violence, sexual exploitation, unplanned pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and HIV (Family Health International, 2002).

Socialization of men prepares them for a world of management and leadership characterized by competitiveness, aggressive, risk-taking, and long-term dependable commitment to the career. The 'macho-world' of business, management/administration, or

politics is not for women. Socialization goes on as a continuous process through various agencies – family, school, media, religion, etc. the role and images supplied to reinforce the gender ideology. This explanation is functionalist approach because people are acted upon by society and socialization is viewed as beyond human control. Those who reject this approach hold that the ideology imposed is that of dominant groups. In the symbolic interaction men are the dominant groups and women constitute the subordinate groups.

Sexual Division of Labour and Masculinity

In the Indian society, a statement like “home and childcare taste sweeter to women while business and profession taste sweeter to men”, has for a long time been receiving an unquestioned social approval. The socio-cultural norms have, by and large, restricted the role of women to the bearing and rearing of children and attending to household chores; and women are not expected to involve themselves in work outside the home. An oft-quoted verse from the ancient Tamil classical (Sangam) literature has explicitly stated that the soul of a man is in his work outside whereas the soul of a woman is in taking care of the man (Kurunthogai: 135). A synonymous term for women in the Tamil language is “Illal” (one who rules the home).

A woman’s connection to the market and the ‘public’ is derived from her connection to her husband and family. Similarly, a woman working for payment outside her home has been lowly valued and less respected. A woman working as an unpaid family labourer in her family’s farm is more socially acceptable than a woman working in the same field as a paid or waged labourer (Ministry of Labour, Govt. of India, 1997: 62).

Depending on different social values ascribed to women and men, there are variations in male-female job polarization. The effects of stereotypical thinking and gender bias influence women and men as they do their higher education, producing differences in their career expectations and choices. Young men receive a message from society that they should prepare themselves for a career that would support a family. Young women get a different message that their careers will be less important than their men’s. Even higher education confines women with little chance for advancement (Brannon, 1996: 310).

Violence and Masculinity

The contemporary women’s movements were instrumental in identifying and bringing into focus gender issues affecting women in different parts of the world. Although issues like violence against women are universal, they manifest themselves differently in different societies, e.g., dowry killing, genital mutilation, honour killings, etc. The women’s movements and their academic offshoot - Women’s Studies - not only made these “invisible” issues visible; they provided a sound, comprehensive, alternative framework for the analysis of all ‘human’ issues. The “women’s perspective” on everything from sexuality, gender relations to development paradigm, and ecology were evolved through a fine blend of scholarship and experience sharing. The most serious attempt to break the dichotomy between “theory” and “action”, “experience” and “discourse” came from the women’s movements.

While Roop Kanwar’s sati mobilized feminist to raise voice against the violence in the name of religion. The Government reacted and passed a sati prevention bill which was a repeat of the 1929 legislation which again had several flaws. This law blurred the division between

forced and voluntary sati, defines sati as a crime against women, and makes the other people involved in the sati guilty only by abetting the women's act.

In 1980, the Mathura rape case judgment which left free the policemen who raped a minor tribal girl 'Mathura' and blamed the poor girl as responsible for her fate, shocked the middle class educated women in India. In the former, the scales tilted in favor of women while in the latter the court invoked article 25 which guarantees the fundamental rights to worship. On 16th December night 2012, a heinous crime shocked the Nation's Capital when a girl was gang-raped in a moving bus on Delhi road, leading to the countrywide public outrage. The untimely death of the victim acted as a driving force to take action to curb crime against women. The brutality of the crime and widespread agitation forced the Government to amend the existing laws. Mane and Aggleton, 2001 found the society's expectations of women differ from men, society accepts many practices that are harmful to women's sexual health such as early marriage and sexual or domestic violence.

Caste and Masculinity

In Rajasthan, researchers explored the role of caste in men's conceptions of masculinity and violence. The study was undertaken in two districts, which are culturally and economically different districts of the State. Differences that emphasise the different aspects of masculinity by caste were explored. For example, Rajputs emphasized courage and taking part in larger issues that affected the society, while Jats emphasized being hard workers and providers of the family. However, across castes, there were deep commonalities in men's conceptions of masculinity and violence. For all respondents, violence towards their wives was catalyzed by perceived "failed" masculinity, including disputes over either spouse not performing their role adequately or threats towards the husband's masculine entitlements (Satish Kumar., Gupt S.D., and George, 2002).

In Punjab, researchers explored the impact of militancy and the consequences of broader economic change with increased agricultural growth negatively resulting in increased domestic violence. The study was undertaken in two districts with varied experience of militancy and agricultural change. The main finding of the study was that the role of women, especially among upper castes in Punjab, is to support the public face of their husbands' masculinity. During the militancy period, when men's masculinity was undermined in the public sphere, women were particularly vulnerable to violence from their husbands in the private sphere. Currently, with industrialization and the Green Revolution, lower castes have access to higher incomes and are better able to emulate higher castes to gain status. This process includes lower caste men emulating upper-caste men's tight control of women and reporting much higher levels of violence (Dagar Rainuka, 2002).

Men and Masculinity

Men's expression of masculinity is also closely linked to controlling women in their family and ensuring that women fulfill expected roles. Women who do not fulfill essential roles or who challenge men's actions threaten men's masculinity, often resulting in a violent reaction. Fuller (2001) found that it was always wives who triggered violent reactions, either because they didn't comply with their part of the marital contract or because they "reacted with energy" when the man did not fulfill his. Situations, where the wife confronted the man in front of his family or

friends, were especially likely to provoke violence. Honour killings happen when women are killed by male family members for “dishonouring their families” through infidelity and other sexual transgressions, which are perhaps the most extreme examples of such behaviour.

Men and masculinity pass as the norm but women and girls are the “gender” that needs protection and control. Men in the society are expected to become “protectors” of and “providers” for their families. The society implicitly, and often explicitly, required men to be strong, aggressive, and without emotions. Of course, not all men or masculinities are the same. The appearance of patriarchal masculinity, characterized by male sexual dominance and unequal gender roles, coupled with a lack of sexual experience and knowledge, some men seek to assert their manhood through sexual prowess. This has a real harmful impact upon women in society as the manner they choose to engage with their sexuality arises through channels of coercive sexual behaviour and sexual control. What is interesting to explore is that these actions seem to display masculinity to other men above all else. Anxieties regarding sexual health, ideas about female sexuality, and attitudes towards male-to-male sex also work to link masculinity and sexuality together.

Men have largely been invisible in identifying gender harms because of the general pattern of male power and privilege. Exposing men’s harms is critical, however, to a more realistic understanding of how gender inequality and other inequalities are constructed. Seeing men as gendered is the focus of masculinity analysis. That analysis has exposed how gender harm is connected to men’s very identity as men. In particular, masculinity requires constant proof of one’s manhood; it is a status never achieved, but one constantly to be established and to be tested.

Summary

Throughout the world, there are strong social and cultural norms that perpetuate power imbalances between men and women. While men usually have more agency than the women in their lives, men’s decisions and behaviours are also profoundly shaped by rigid social and cultural expectations related to masculinity. Expansion of the discussion about how gender norms affect both women and men help us better understand the complex ways that rigid gender norms and power relation burden our society, and effectively engage men and boys in reflections to inequalities and change.

Understanding how masculinities are constructed at work reveals not only how they reinforce male hierarchies, but also how they disadvantage all women. So, this close look at two male-dominated jobs is quite valuable for women. It illustrates how the privileges and harms of men feed men’s subordination of women and the hierarchy of women’s subordination. It also should make us wonder what happens like a job or a workplace becomes more integrated. Ultimately, masculinities analysis contributes to the goal of equality and justice. At the same time, these pieces reinforce the difficulty of that task. Much of masculinities analysis exposes a deeply negative, constricting definition of manhood. One of the critical challenges for a reoriented masculinity is to imagine an affirmative identity. It is also a challenge to give up power, and much of masculinities scholarship does not provide a clear answer for how that can be achieved. But the way to achieve equality is to include all analyses, however difficult or uncomfortable.

Conclusion

Achieving gender equality is not possible without changes in men's lives as well as in women's. It is important to be cognizant of the fact that gender inequalities in patriarchal societies favour men; thus, it is essential to encourage men to take responsibility for reproductive health as a responsible sexual partner, husband, and father. Men, in particular, should be educated and socialized about responsible sexual relations and to play a vital role in sharing women's burdens. Also, sustained efforts need to be maintained to increase the involvement of men in the family by removing stereotypical attitudes, socio-cultural barriers, violence against women, and gender injustice. For effective changes in sexual behaviour, these underlying structural factors need to be considered and addressed seriously.

According to a review by the Public Health Foundation of India and ICRW in 2014, organizations used gender-accommodating or gender-transformative strategies to change the attitudes of men and boys around gender-equity. As the transition is taking place in India there is a change in the mindset of the people and women are entering into the public space. This will break the cultural code and masculinity; ultimately result in a gender fair society.

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