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**Social Science Research on Indian Masculinities:
Retrospect and Prospect**

by

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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ON INDIAN MASCULINITIES: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Introduction

The renowned social theorist Juergen Habermas has perceptively underscored the connection between late modernity and an increasing preoccupation with the 'grammar of forms of life', which triggers various New Social Movements and opens novel avenues of intellectual inquiry (Habermas, 1981). Thus, the second-wave feminists' critical interrogation of the socially constructed character of both feminine and masculine identities gave rise to the contemporary women's movement and to the discipline of Women's Studies. In recent decades, many parts of the world have also seen the slow but steady rise of men's groups geared to the salvaging of masculinity. The study of men and masculinities (SMM) is also gaining recognition as an interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry (Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005).

SMM originated in and remains largely sympathetic to feminist concerns. It is a constructive response to the diverse changes in men's lives induced by the ongoing project of women's liberation, as also by significant shifts in the economy (e.g., the transition from fordism to post-fordism) and society (e.g., changes in the structure of the family). The consequent disruption of the gender roles (e.g., 'breadwinner' and 'protector') traditionally assigned to men caused a crisis of hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity. The bewilderment of men buffeted by these changes found expression in various modes: as a demand for rights, a search for spiritual solace, or an unwavering commitment to the feminist cause. SMM seeks to probe the predicament of these men (and to provide some of the means needed for its resolution) by viewing it as part of the continual construction and reconstruction of masculinities across time and space. Thus, it is not a hostile reaction to Women's Studies. Being closely interrelated facets of Gender Studies, the two forms of inquiry can and should develop in a dialogical fashion.

The growing interest in SMM has given rise to an expanding corpus of scholarly output on the subject. Even a quick perusal of *Men's Lives* – a widely used anthology – or of recent issues of the Sage journal *Men and Masculinities* would indicate the variety and depth of this work in progress (Kimmel and Messner 2001). Though SMM is yet to find a secure academic foothold in India, the country requires it for at least two reasons. For one, masculinities are deeply implicated in a whole host of problems looming over the country, ranging from an abysmally low sex-ratio to communal violence. Besides, during the last two decades, the country has witnessed the emergence of men's groups, as also the publication of a significant scholarly

corpus examining various dimensions of men's lives (Kulkarni 2007; Chopra, Osella & Osella 2004).

The research project seeks to critically survey the scholarly investigation of indigenous masculinities against the background outlined above so as to formulate an agenda for future research, teaching and positive interventions in the area. The attempt is to highlight the ways in which the study of masculinities sheds new light on a wide spectrum of social phenomena ranging from colonialism and communalism to sexuality. The project report encompasses the relevant literature generated by the social sciences and allied academic fields, as also the concerns articulated by various activist groups focusing on the gender dynamics of men and masculinities.

The inquiry takes as its point of departure the definition of masculinity provided by R. W. Connell (2005: 71): “ ‘Masculinity’ ...is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.” Its methodological orientation is ‘exegetical’ in the broadest sense of the term, involving a careful scrutiny of the relevant texts aimed at uncovering the manifold thematisation and treatment of Indian masculinities within various disciplinary and theoretical frameworks. Techniques of data collection chiefly include extensive use of materials available in libraries and on the Internet, as also interaction with scholars and activists who have done pioneering work in the area.

It is hoped that the findings of the research project would be used for developing curricula geared to the study of men and masculinities within and across the social sciences. Besides, they might be of use to activists associated with the women's movement as well as progressive men's groups in India and elsewhere.

A Thematic Overview

Though systematic research examining different manifestations of masculinity in India is of recent origin, it has already enriched our understanding of the country's past and present in several ways. The following is an illustrative, thematic account of certain major insights that have emerged from the seminal work of scholars belonging to the three disciplines that have been particularly attentive to the construction and reconstruction of Indian masculinities: Psychology, History and Anthropology.¹

¹ A caveat is in order regarding the inclusion of Psychology in this list. It is mainly the psychoanalytical wing of the discipline, which has generated significant work germane to our concerns (*vide*. Akhtar 2008).

(A) Psychological and Cultural Dynamics of Masculinities: The work of Sudhir Kakar represents the earliest and most sustained attempt to understand the psychological and cultural dynamics of masculinities in India. While he is a polymath scholar, his initial training was in psychoanalysis. In a landmark study, Kakar (1992/1978) probes the specificity of the normative matrices, family structures and socialization processes which shape the psyche of upper caste Hindu men.

According to Kakar, the closeness of the mother-son bond is an important formative influence on the mental make-up of Indian men. It stems from a variety of cultural conditions. A strongly entrenched son-preference means that the status of a married woman depends upon her ability to bear male children. Consequently, women make a considerable emotional investment in their sons. To this must be added the unusual length and intensity of maternal care received by the infant, as also the negligible role of the father in looking after young children.

An important consequence of these early childhood experiences is the Indian man's ambivalent attitude towards the mother who is seen both as a nurturing benefactress and a threatening seductress. The modal resolution of the conflict involves a lasting identification with the mother. However, the subliminal fear of the 'bad mother' is not completely erased and typically surfaces as an anxiety focused on the threatening sexuality of older or mature women. Another consequence is a permeable ego formation which generates trusting friendliness and eagerness to develop attachments. This explains the intimacy and vitality evident in Indian social relations despite widespread material deprivation.

Given the intensity and ambivalence of the relationship between mother and son, Indian boys rely on their fathers to a much greater extent than their Western counterparts in the endeavor to overcome maternal dominance and acquire a masculine identity. Hence they feel the necessity of oedipal alliance more acutely than the hostility of the Oedipus complex. Yet, the demands of the extended family require the father to maintain a certain aloofness from his son(s), creating a piquant dilemma for the latter.

Economists and political scientists have evinced little interest in the exploration of Indian men and masculinities. There are of course partial exceptions to the rule (*vide* Menon 2007). On the other hand, scholars engaged in the study of literature, media and culture have readily entered this area of inquiry (*vide* the articles contributed by Karen Gabriel, Ravi Vasudevan and P. K. Vijayan in Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004). Other disciplines which have witnessed some work in the area include Social Geography (Raju, Atkins, Kumar and Townsend 1999), Social Work (Joseph 2005), and Legal Studies (Narrain 2004).

It is interesting to note that two pioneering books on Indian men were written in a popular vein and authored by freelance women writers (De 1998; Mulchandani 1999).

Kakar's investigation into certain distinctive psychological traits of Indian men provides a useful point of departure. But his findings are largely based on limited clinical data, folklore and classical mythology. His work therefore tends to be somewhat static and ahistorical. This partly accounts for the ease with which he can reiterate the gist of his above-mentioned conjectures regarding the male psyche in a recent book on contemporary India (Kakar and Kakar 2007: 96-100) despite the significant socio-cultural transformation the country has witnessed since they were first formulated three decades ago.

The work of Ashis Nandy (1983) – who too is a psychologist and versatile scholar – tracks complex shifts in the political culture of Indian masculinities by focusing on the colonial period. He argues that one strand in the indigenous concept of manliness valorized the Brahmana in his cerebral asceticism vis-à-vis the violent and active Kshatriya who represented the feminine principle in the cosmos. Hence traditional Indian society placed limits on Kshatriyahood as a way of life. This normative order began to change due to the impact of British colonialism which propagated hyper-masculine ideals and denigrated the colonized as infantile, devious, and effeminate people. According to the British, the positive qualities of childlikeness could be found in the loyal 'martial races' of India, while childishness or feminine passive-aggression was a trait of the effete nationalists and babus drawn from the non-martial races.

Indians initially responded to this quandary by giving a new salience to Kshatriyahood as true Indianness. Many of them tried to regain self-esteem by seeking hyper-masculinity or hyper-Kshatriyahood that would make sense to their compatriots and rulers. But in an unorganized, plural society, with a tradition of only contingent legitimacy for warriorhood, such a strategy was not efficacious. This is what the advocates of armed resistance discovered to their chagrin. They had isolated themselves from the society by the time Gandhi entered Indian politics.

The colonial culture's ordering of sexual identities was as follows: *Purushatva* (manliness) > *Naritva* (womanliness) > *Klibatva* (femininity in man). Gandhi responded through two orderings, each of which could be invoked depending on the needs of the situation. The first, borrowed from the traditions of saintliness in India, put androgyny above both *purushatva* and *naritva*. The second ordering was offered specifically as a justification of the anti-imperialist movement: *Naritva* > *Purushatva* > *Kapurushatva* (cowardice or failure of masculinity). It could make the magical power of the feminine cosmic principle available to the man who defied his cowardice by owning to his feminine self.

In sum, Nandy seems to argue that pre-colonial Indian society sustained a distinctive and composite gender order which was subsequently warped through the impact of the hyper-masculinist imperial ideology introduced by the British rulers. The nationalist response led to the inflation of the martial or Kshatriya model of masculinity that had earlier occupied a limited social space. Gandhi found a way out of this impasse by drawing on the rich resources available

in the Indian tradition to create an emancipatory configuration of gender, culture and power. While Nandy's thesis remains influential, some of its presuppositions have been problematised by Rosalind O'Hanlon and Mrinalini Sinha in relation to the pre-colonial and colonial periods respectively.

(B) Masculinities in the Mughal Era: In an essay marked by a deft interweaving of rich empirical material and analytical finesse, the British historian O'Hanlon has convincingly demonstrated the centrality of martial masculinity to society and politics in the late Mughal period (O'Hanlon 1997). She argues that in this period the battlefield, hunting expeditions and sports served as sites for the demonstration of the traits associated with martial valour. On the other hand, the court, the household and the harem were seen as abodes of effete and luxury. Contra Nandy, the code of martial masculinity was not exclusively modelled on the Kshatriya ideal, and it entered significantly into a wide variety of practices ranging from military recruitment and diplomacy to fellowship among men from different communities.

In a subsequent essay, O'Hanlon (1999) explores the ways in which norms of manhood informed the political and religious discourses of early seventeenth century Mughal north India, establishing significant links between kingship, statecraft and imperial service. To this end, she presents a case study of one high imperial servant in this period. O'Hanlon argues that the definitions of elite manliness started changing in the later seventeenth century and their nexus with imperial service frayed due to the emergence of a new urban ethos conducive to gentlemanly connoisseurship and consumption. This led to the intensification of strains in Mughal service morale.

O'Hanlon (2007a) has also explored an earlier stage of the Mughal era by investigating the linkages between kingdom, household and the body during the reign of Akbar. Her intention is to examine the composite character of Mughal political culture from the perspectives of gender and the body. She argues that Akbar drew on contemporary *akhlaqi* literature (ethical digests which offered advice on the acquisition of virtue) to create a socially inclusive model of masculine virtue which cut across law, religion, caste and region. The model emphasized the natural inner purity of the male body, and the ways of achieving moral and human perfection in the three homologous worlds that men inhabited as governors: the individual body, the household and the kingdom.

In her most recent work on the subject, O'Hanlon (2007b) draws on a wide range of sources—Sanskrit, Indo-Persian, Marathi and Indian English—to map the socio-economic and political ramifications of military sports and the history of the martial body in pre-colonial and colonial India. She underscores the importance traditionally attached to the cultivation of the bodily skills required in cavalry warfare and the concomitant development of a country-wide network that

provided patronage and employment to the fighting specialists equipped with such skills. O'Hanlon argues that wrestling and allied exercises which were widely diffused and had become a vital complement to military preparation in the early modern period, dwindled in the aftermath of colonial demilitarization. This in turn led to the displacement of distinctive cultures of the body, as well as the depletion of mobility and honorable employment. The subsequent nationalist attempts to 'recover' the older martial physical culture were driven by anxieties about Indian racial decline and the need for programmes aimed at racial self-strengthening. This is precisely Mrinalini Sinha's point of departure.

(C) Politics of Colonial Masculinities: Building on the pioneering work of Rosselli (1980), Sinha – a historian of Indian origin, currently based in the U.S. – has pointed out that 'British manliness' and 'Indian effeminacy' were conjointly constructed through political contestation within the imperial social formation (Sinha 1997). It is well known that the British categorized Indian people in terms of 'martial' and 'non-martial' races. In this invidious taxonomy, the Bengali 'babus' were labelled as 'effeminate'. Consequently, they sought to recoup their masculinity. These were not purely local developments as the struggle was imbricated with the larger colonial contest, and also with the changing dynamics of gender relations in Britain. Sinha argues that an examination of the contending conceptions of masculinity, which were formed and re-formed during the colonial period, both in Britain and in India, would give us a much better understanding of the imperial social formation.

Certain significant ramifications of colonial masculinity can be gauged by revisiting the controversy surrounding the Age of Consent Bill (1891) that was apparently aimed at curbing the evil effects of child marriage, especially in Bengal, where the British thought the institution was most widely abused. In particular, it sought to protect the child wife below the age of twelve years from the perils of sexual intercourse by declaring such intercourse to be an offence on the part of the husband. The Indian response to this measure was twofold. The pro-reform section responded positively, while the traditionalists protested vehemently. The latter saw the Bill as an affront to Indian manhood and as an egregious imperialist intervention in the private domain. But even the former did not accord centrality to the agency and autonomy of Indian women, instead it treated them as objects of reform. The marginalisation of women thus cut across the reformist vs. traditionalist divide and left a deep imprint on the nationalist movement.

What the British rulers sought through measures like the Age of Consent Bill was, of course, the entrenchment of their hegemony in India. But their efforts at reform were half-hearted, as they felt threatened by the emergence of feminism in Britain itself, where sensationalised cases of child prostitution had led to the mobilisation of the consent debate of 1885. They thus found it expedient to make peace with Indian patriarchy through the device of an executive order which rendered the Consent Act toothless. As Sinha points out, the final upshot was that both imperialist and nationalist interventions were subsumed within the larger matrix of colonial

masculinity, marking a convergence of the efforts to recuperate the feminist challenge to British masculinity with the revivalist-nationalist efforts to reassert Indian masculinity.

While Sinha sheds new light on the reconstruction of patriarchy in the imperial social formation, her critique often elides certain important dimensions of indigenous masculinity. This is evident in her insufficient engagement with the cultural and political devices through which Indians sought to defend or reconstruct masculine identities (Singha 1998).² Besides, her study is quite closely aligned with Partha Chatterjee's important but controversial formulation which holds that the nationalist discourse in India was predicated on a dichotomy between the spiritual/inner and material/outer spheres, and that the nationalists recognized the dominance of the British in the latter sphere, but saw the former as an inviolable repository of superior indigenous traditions and values (Chatterjee 1986).

(D) Masculinities in the Matrix of Nationalism and Communalism: For a perceptive interrogation of Chatterjee's theory of nationalism, and for a nuanced account of the imbrication of masculinities with nationalist and communal moral economies, we may turn to the work of Joseph Alter – an anthropologist of Indian origin, currently based in the U. S. A. While granting the usefulness of Chatterjee's interpretation of the nationalist discourse, Alter finds his use of the term “spiritual” somewhat misleading on account of its association with the mystical and the esoteric. He argues that while Hindu notions of somaticity, encompassing ritual, health, and social hierarchy fell within the “inner” domain of the *soi-disant* spiritual discourse of nationalism, the forces of imperial power impinged directly on bodies as material objects. Alter extends his argument by examining contemporary popular Hindi literature on *brahmacharya* and shows how the “spiritual” male body has become a focal site for a discourse of nationalism (Alter 1994a).

This literature, chiefly intended for young men, reveals an articulation of traditional life-cycle prescriptions pertaining to *dharma* and the post-colonial anxiety to shun the contaminating effects of hedonistic modernity. The discourse of celibacy here becomes part of a ‘somatic nationalism’, geared to the resistance of dissolute Western ideologies and to the regeneration of the motherland. Central to the pursuit of celibacy is the retention of the semen, which is imbued with not just physiological, but also spiritual/moral potency. An elaborate regimen involving the right kind of diet, exercise and various other norms of conduct, such as the avoidance of pornography, is proffered to this end. It does not spring from a puritanical preoccupation with vice and virtue, but rather reflects a hydraulic and biochemical concern with the refashioning of

² This lacuna has been partly redressed by Indira Chowdhury (2001) in her insightful study of gender and the politics of culture in colonial Bengal.

the male body. Alter finds an exacting embodiment of such a regimen in the wrestlers of North India, with the wrestling *akhara* (gymnasium) serving as a social microcosm through which the aforementioned ideas regarding celibacy are both put into practice and propagated.

The modern purveyors of the ideology of celibacy trace the 'sexual addiction' of the country's youth to the 'invention' of sexuality (*à la* Foucault) in the colonial period. Whereas there was an elaborate discourse on the *art of sex* in precolonial India, what colonialism generated was an *apparatus of sexuality*, which turned sex into a socio-moral force insidiously pervading the entire cultural arena. The legacy of colonial sexuality is incarnated in the postcolonial 'libertine', whose masculinity is based on pathological individualism, domination and self-gratification, leading to a sheer waste of vital fluids. The *brahmachari* (celibate male), with his commitment to self-control, balance and natural truth, represents a nationalist negation of such libertine masculinity. It is worth noting that the *brahmacharya* discourse underscores the dangers of sex within the family. It severely condemns excessive indulgence (what is not required for the purpose of procreation) in this supposedly legitimate and institutionalised form of sex. By thus making the 'inner domain' of the family a site of national reform, it clearly departs from what Chatterjee sees as the early nationalist emphasis on the sanctity of this domain.

The relationship between sex and social reform implicit in the *brahmacharya* discourse has a precedent in the traditional Indian ideal of the *sannyasi* (renouncer) – a *brahmachari* deriving his socio-moral authority from an ascetic control of the senses. M. K. Gandhi, who occupied a liminal position vis-à-vis the premodern and contemporary Indian discourses on sex, invoked this ideal; however, he democratically proffered it to everybody. He also endorsed the conventional importance of semen retention, although without treating semen as the repository of truth. Above all, his views on sex, drawn as much from the Hindu tradition as from certain strands of Christianity, ultimately entailed a transcendence of the body towards a spiritual horizon. They formed a unique amalgam that granted gender equality in the quest for virtue through the regulation of bio-moral substance, but arguably underwrote the new nationalist patriarchy.³ The contemporary discourse on *brahmacharya* on the other hand, is one-dimensional in its profane pursuit of celibacy as a way to engender nationalism, and in its straightforwardly patriarchal thrust.

Alter has also provided a trenchant critique of the communal ideology underlying the physical education regimen prevalent in the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Alter 1994b). To this end he contrasts the RSS ideology with the non-sectarian somatic nationalism of north Indian wrestlers, both of whom seem to be drawing on certain common elements of the Hindu tradition such as *brahmacharya*. The comparison clearly reveals that the former represents a curious melange of modern Western practices (e.g. European Physical Education techniques bulk large in the RSS drill) and a warped understanding of Hindu culture that aggressively

³ For the author's book-length treatment of Gandhi, see Alter (2000).

excludes other religious communities from the definition of the nation, while covertly justifying the unjust status-quo within the Hindu social fold.

In contrast, the somatic nationalism of the wrestlers is seen to be an authentically indigenous vision of a harmonious development of the self and society, syncretic in the way it cuts across communal/caste lines, and projects an inclusive, 'geomoral' conception of the nation. It seeks to overcome the baleful effects of immoral modernism by developing the psychosomatic self through a micro-physics of rigorous discipline anchored in the *akahara* (gymnasium). The nation is seen as the *akahara* writ large, embodying an elemental balance in the national ecology. While this image of the nation is fashioned in terms of Hindu notions of substance and balance, it is fundamentally unlike the socio-cultural landscape visualised by the RSS or other such champions of Hindutva. It substitutes generic geomorality for the particular, communal ideology of sacred rivers, holy mountains and blessed soil, thereby offering a Hindu critique of Hindutva demagoguery through a somatic discourse.

Alter thus offers a richly textured understanding of certain important strands of Indian masculinity within an essentially ethnographic framework. However, he does not pay adequate attention to the ways in which the seemingly benign somatic nationalism of the wrestlers often translates into an active and gruesome complicity in the murder and mayhem of communal riots, which is a commonly observed occurrence in contemporary India.⁴

The foregoing overview has tried to show how the small but significant corpus of social science literature pertaining to Indian men and masculinities has contributed to the ongoing debates on a wide spectrum of issues ranging from the cultural matrix of the body, sexuality and personality formation to the politics of colonialism, nationalism and communalism. It is quite evident that further investigations along these lines would be of great cognitive value.

Organisational Initiatives

During the last two decades, Indian civil society has witnessed a slow and sporadic but significant crystallisation of organisational initiatives and interventions targeting men and masculinities. They can be broadly divided into three categories: pro-feminist, gay affirmative, and those championing men's rights. This is of course a rather crude classification which conceals commonalities (between the first two categories) as well as heterogeneity (especially

⁴ Kakar (1996: 66-110) offers a graphic and unsettling account of this phenomenon in the context of communal riots in Hyderabad. It is based on interviews with Hindu and Muslim *pehlwans* (wrestlers) in the city. Kakar cites Alter (1992a; 1992b) in a largely adulatory fashion, and ends his essay on a note of bewilderment: "Killers in the service of their religious communities, they [the *pehlwans*] do not fit easy psychological or philosophical categories."

within the second category) in the service of analytical convenience. However, all these forms of mobilisation raise important questions which the social scientists are yet to address in an adequate manner.

(A) Pro-feminist Initiatives: The women's movements of the 1970s and 1980s were inspired by second-wave feminism and had wide repercussions including the sensitisation of numerous young men to the ravages of patriarchy. Some of these men (and like-minded women) have launched pro-feminist initiatives with the objective of recasting patriarchal masculinities to promote women's empowerment and gender justice. Accordingly, they have been interrogating the dominant constructs of masculinity through a critique of male socialisation and gender roles. They particularly seek to reduce male violence against women, children and other men, and to eliminate various expressions of sexism. Prominent representatives of the pro-feminist tendency include Purush Uvaach (Pune), the Mumbai-based Men against Violence and Abuse (MAVA), Men's Action to Stop Violence Against Women (MASVAW, Lucknow), and the Forum to Engage Men (FEM) – a recently formed country-wide network. While the first (and the oldest) of these still largely retains its character as an informal group – started in the late 1980s, it is run by a middle-class couple who hold periodic meetings at their residence – the others have assumed a familiar NGO format typified by MAVA.

MAVA claims that it came into existence in response to a small advertisement in the *Indian Express* and its sister publications, which called for men who are 'strongly opposed to violence towards wives from their husbands, and would like to help stop it' (MAVA 2003). Registered in March 1993 as a 'Society' under the Societies Registration Act, MAVA is run by a Managing Committee of five men from various kinds of professional background. The organisation has women members as well. Its primary objective has been to bring about a change in the 'traditional, male dominated' attitudes of men and help stop or prevent violence or abuse of women in our society. The focus has been on domestic violence and abuse.

MAVA's programmes have included the following: free counselling and guidance to families facing marital conflict, gender sensitisation programmes for different target groups including school and college youth, publication of the Marathi periodical *Purush Spandana* (Men's Heartbeats), Medical Aid Drive for Dipti Khanna – a 19 year-old girl badly injured by an acid attack in 1995 – and networking with women's groups and like-minded bodies through referral of cases of domestic violence and by jointly organising activities aimed at tackling specific gender issues. 'Yuva Maitri' (Friendship among Youth) is particularly noteworthy among MAVA's recent projects. Supported by the Population Council (New York), it involved the gender sensitisation and training of a group of young male students from six colleges in the Pune district.

The regular publication of *Purush Spandan* over the last dozen years is perhaps the most significant contribution of MAVA. Published (jointly with 'Purush Uvaach' from 1996 to 2006 and independently since then) annually during Diwali, *Purush Spandana* is probably the first publication of its kind in the country. It focuses on gender issues and carries reports, essays, autobiographical/biographical accounts, stories and poems voicing the ideas, views and sentiments of men from different walks of life. The periodical has received prizes from various literary bodies in the state. English translations of selected articles from the back issues are now available in the form of a book (Ravindra, Sadani, Geetali & Mukund 2007).

(B) Gay-affirmative Initiatives: A number of groups have been energetically engaged in the struggle to end discrimination against homosexual men. They seek to root out homophobia which gives rise to such discrimination. Its more specific targets include Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1860)—a colonial piece of legislation that criminalizes homosexuality. The Section, appearing under the title 'Of Unnatural Offences', reads as follows: 'Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. *Explanation:* Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section' (Ratanlal and Dhirajlal 1992: 431).

The concerns of homosexual men are gaining a wider audience in the aftermath of the AIDS pandemic. Besides, the gay cause has vocal and media-savvy spokesmen like the Mumbai-based activist Ashok Row Kavi. He launched a newsletter – *Bombay Dost* – in 1991 and the Humsafar Trust in 1994 as platforms for gay men and men who have sex with men. The Trust seeks to free these men from the bane of invisibility and infamy. It is active in educating them about sexually transmitted diseases in general and HIV/AIDS in particular. It provides them with support structures and access to health facilities.

The Humsafar Trust has gained wide recognition for its activities which include community work, outreach into the target groups, as also advocacy and research on gender and sexuality issues concerning sexual minorities. It organised the first gay men's conference in the sub-continent. It is also an active member of global networks like the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, and the International Lesbian and Gay Association. The Trust has always sought to work with the government, the medical establishment and various social groups involved in sexual health and social empowerment.

While homosexual subcultures have been covertly present in Indian society for long, recent years have witnessed a more open acknowledgement of the gay identity. One clear indication of this change is the unconventional representation of homosexuality in the cinema and the mass media more generally. It is particularly noteworthy that a mainstream publishing house has brought out

an anthology of Indian gay literature (Merchant 1999). Events like Queer Pride marches have been organised in many Indian cities to affirm the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Yet, the multi-pronged campaign to secure a repeal or suitable amendment of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code has so far drawn a blank, and it still hangs like the sword of Damocles over the gay community.

(c) Men's Rights Initiatives: The groups fighting for men's rights are weary of feminism. They focus on the modern constructions of gender which (according to them) place unfair restrictions on men. Accordingly, they target the legal and social realities that place the male at a disadvantage. A widely publicised example of the men's rights tendency is the Mumbai-based Purush Hakka Samrakshan Samiti (Committee for the Protection of Men's Rights) which claims to be the first such registered body in the country.

The Samiti was formed in 1996 to fight against the allegedly gross misuse of Section 498 (A) of the Indian Penal Code and to safeguard the interests of 'harassed husbands' and their relatives who were said to be victims of such misuse. It claimed that within a few years 6000 men had joined the fraternity, mostly comprising well educated, middle-class men in the 25 to 45 age group. Similar groups have emerged in many other parts of the country, and there is now a national network of those advocating men's rights – Save Indian Family Foundation – which opposes a wide range of laws and policies that (it claims) are being used against men.

The controversial Section 498 (A) of the Indian Penal Code reads as follows: **Husband or relative of husband of a woman subjecting her to cruelty-** Whoever, being the husband or the relative of the husband of a woman, subject such woman to cruelty shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and shall be liable to fine.

Explanation- For the purposes of this section "cruelty" means-

(a) any wilful conduct which is of such a nature as is likely to drive the woman to commit suicide or to cause grave injury or danger to life, limb or health (whether mental or physical) of the woman; or

(b) harassment of the woman where such harassment is with a view to coercing her or any person related to her to meet any unlawful demand for any property or valuable security or is on account of failure by her or any person related to her to meet such demand (Ratanlal and Dhirajlal 1992: 569).

This Section - inserted in 1983 to combat the menace of dowry deaths - makes the harassment of a woman by her husband or his relatives a non-bailable, non-compoundable, cognisable offence. Police complaints filed under it may result in the immediate imprisonment of the accused.

The men's rights groups allege that the Section has been widely abused to harass and torture the husbands and their family members. They see it as a blunt instrument instigated by the feminists' indiscriminate emphasis on women's victimhood and men's culpability. Therefore they target

women's organisations—dubbed as 'home-breakers rather than protectors of women's rights'—that are alleged to be aiding and abetting the abuse of the Section through misplaced ideological fervour. What motivates their protest is an unprecedented sense of vulnerability felt by men *qua* men. They also see the said Section as the thin end of the wedge that would irreparably cleave hoary institutions like the family and property, ultimately leading to a breakdown of Indian culture.

The long-term remedial measures sought by the men's rights groups include the following demands: Section 498(A) should be made non-cognisable, bailable and compoundable; if a complaint filed under the Section is proved false, the complainant should pay full compensation and such a person should be punished under special legal provisions; Section 498 (B) should be added to facilitate the lodging of a complaint against harassment by the wife or her relatives; and no compensation should be granted to working women in case of separation.

These groups have organised conventions and sought publicity in other ways to further their cause. They have also lobbied with the Government (especially Law and Home Ministries) and Parliament in pursuit of their demands. Their efforts do not seem to have produced any tangible results. What is more, they have been strongly criticised by feminists who see them as part of a backlash against the attempted empowerment of women (Tata Institute of Social Sciences 1999).

A sociological commonality among these different men's groups is that they are predominantly of urban, middle-class provenance. The gay groups may constitute a partial exception, as they have been particularly attentive to their lower class brethren including the *hijras*. Pro-feminist men's groups are also trying to reach out to rural and subaltern men. It is possible to speculate that some dalit men may develop an awareness of their specific identity formed through the intersection of caste and gender, somewhat like the sensitivity shown by a section of African-American men to their peculiar predicament rooted in contradictory gender and racial locations. In any case, it seems likely that the landscape of mobilised masculinities will show greater heterogeneity in the near future.

A Possible Agenda

I hope this broad overview has given a fair indication of the rich potential of SMM in India. Let me conclude by presenting an agenda for further research and intervention vis-à-vis some of the issues discussed above.

The investigation of the pre-colonial, traditional matrix of Indian masculinities and its transformation under the impact of colonialism and modernity calls for a multi-pronged research strategy.⁵ Kakar's writings focusing on the psycho-sexual dynamics of personality formation and social behaviour indicate one element of such a strategy. It is necessary to build upon his work through theoretically informed empirical explorations attuned to the cultural flux induced by rapid urbanisation, industrialisation and globalisation. Nandy's imaginative account of the political and cultural transactions that produced a new gestalt of masculinities during the colonial era is a hard act to follow; but it has a considerable heuristic value. O' Hanlon's exemplary excavation of the codes and practices shaping masculine conduct and linking it to wider configurations of power during the Mughal era needs to be extended to other ruling class cultures in the country.

Sinha's concern with the dialectics of gender in the imperial social formation can be fruitfully carried beyond the chronological and thematic limits she sets herself. This would entail attention to the role of the colonial state's legal and cultural apparatuses, the transcontinental circulation of ideologies like Nazism, and various currents within the nationalist movement that contributed to the restructuring of Indian masculinities. Only thus can we gain an adequate purchase on the historical constitution and political character of the new patriarchies that emerged from our encounter with colonialism.⁶

Even as Sinha draws to our attention the colonial crucible of masculinity, Alter alerts us to the plurality of discourses and specificity of sites that constitute male bodies and insert them into larger configurations like nationalism.⁷ The changing plebeian discourses of virility/patriotism and practices of physical culture/masculine camaraderie would be worthy of investigation from this standpoint. Particular attention needs to be paid to their key role in the mass mobilisation programme of militant Hindu nationalist formations such as the Bajrang Dal and Shiv Sena.⁸

Alter's emphasis on the body needs to be complemented by an accent on the body politic. Together they require attentiveness to the fashioning of subjectivities via processes of representation, political economy and technologies of the self. The construction and reconstruction of masculine subjectivities through the mass media, diverse channels of

⁵ Sanjay Srivastava's work on the Doon School – a famous boarding school for boys in India – provides a critical account of the interface between masculinity and modernity in post-colonial India (Srivastava 1998).

⁶ G. Arunima's study of the historical reasons for the legal abolition of matriliney in twentieth-century Kerala is a path-breaking work of this kind (Arunima 2003).

⁷ For an adumbration of the ways in which violence was inscribed on male bodies during the communal riots in Dharavi (Mumbai) after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, see Chatterji and Mehta (2007: 105-128). Amrita Basu (2000) has used a larger canvas to examine the conundrum involving men as victims and women as agents of communal violence.

⁸ Hansen (1996) and Banerjee (2000; 2005) are good examples of scholarly work in this area.

consumerism and ersatz economies of violence should be explored in this context.⁹ It would be instructive to decipher these phenomena, especially as they resonate with the dynamics of postfordist capitalism and shape the novel forms of nationalism and communalism materialising in its interstices.¹⁰

As for the concerns raised by men's groups, they require urgent investigation. The initiatives of pro-feminist groups in addressing the roots of violence against women (and men) as also in the larger area of gender sensitisation should be studied, refined and replicated. It is necessary to build bridges between them and the women's movement.¹¹ The Purush Samvaad Kendra or Forum for Dialogue with Men, recently launched by the Pune-based women's organisation, Nari Samata Manch, is a welcome move in this direction.

The gay mobilisation has opened up the area of alternative sexual subcultures and of sexuality in general. It has highlighted the plight of men who have sex with men and of male sex-workers in particular. Apart from providing an alternative perspective on pressing problems like the AIDS pandemic, it has stimulated thinking and action aimed at the creation of a healthy, plural order of gender/sexual relations.¹²

The emergence of men's rights groups is among other things a symptom of the social disruption caused by attempts to alter traditional gender relations through an excessive reliance on the blunt weapon of the law. A dialogue with the members and sympathisers of such groups to identify and attend to their genuine grievances and constructive suggestions could be one way of engaging them in a process of conscientisation. Apart from facilitating short-term amelioration, such efforts may also offer valuable lessons for the larger project of creating a gender-just social order.

An adequate interrogation of Indian masculinities would involve critical attentiveness to academic as well as activist desiderata of the sort delineated above. This is surely a tall order. But there is no avoiding it if one is to pursue SMM with the intellectual rigour and contemporary relevance it demands and deserves.

⁹ Some of these themes are ably explored in Srivastava (2007).

¹⁰ Amrit Wilson (2007) provides a useful perspective on such issues in a diasporic context.

¹¹ Two heartening bibliographic examples of such bridge-building are a pro-feminist graphic book on men produced by Rahul Roy, Anupama Chatterjee and Sherna Dastur (2007), and a primer on masculinity in the Gender Basics series of Women Unlimited (Bhasin 2005).

¹² Recent years have witnessed the publication of several books and articles on alternative sexualities in India. Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharya (2007) have compiled a substantial volume on the subject.

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