(DE) CONSTRUCTING
MASCULINITIES
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EdelGive Foundation
An Edelweiss Initiative
marāa
A MEDIA & ARTS COLLECTIVE

(DE) CONSTRUCTING MASCULINITIES

A research study by Maraa, a media and arts collective

Supported by EdelGive Foundation

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Based on the ethnographies shared by the researchers who participated in the study.

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We hope this study can inform and strengthen work on the ground, and we look forward to future collaborations, toward a shared goal of gender justice and equality.

Contents

Foreword *Aparna Uppaluri*	7
Introduction *Angarika Guha*	11
Mardon Waali Baat / Matters of Men *Manak Matiyani*	30
Man, Male, Masculine: Re-examining Gender Constructions *Angarika Guha*	45
Upholding Honour and Pride *Angarika Guha*	71
Division of Labor(ers): Tracing Class and Masculinity *Ram Bhat*	92
Constructing the 'Other': Differences and Stereotypes *Angarika Guha and Ram Bhat*	110
Practices of Masculinity: Repetition, Performance, Subversions *Ram Bhat*	139
Conclusion	158
Annexure I	166
Annexure II	167

By Aparna Uppaluri

Neither in the beginning
nor at the end
neither above
nor below
all vision
is in the middle.

Bishnu Mohapatra
(Rain Incarnations)

Equal Measures 2030, an organization where I serve on the global advisory board, has found that no country is on track to achieve gender equality by 2030, as they index progress across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Alarmingly, nearly 40% of countries have either stagnated or even regressed between 2019 and 2022, and 74% of the SDG targets cannot be met without advancing gender equality.[1] The dominant development paradigm seems under threat, if progress on gender equality continues to slide back or stagnate at this rate. It is evident that existing strategies aimed at promoting gender equality are falling short. While there is an increasing emphasis on programs targeting women in critical areas such as livelihoods, health, nutrition, and education—believed to drive greater

1. https://equalmeasures2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/EM2030_2024_SDG_Gender_Index_EN_digital.pdf

developmental gains—this focus presents significant challenges. Not only does it place the burden of development disproportionately on women, but it also reduces the role of men to instrumental means; to being viewed primarily as holders of power and resources or as perpetrators of violence. The immediate questions that arise are: What are the limitations of this binary perspective on gender within the current development framework? How can this viewpoint be detrimental to all genders? What shifts are necessary in both theory and practice to transform this binary approach?

About four years ago, when Maraa reached out for support in their efforts to address gender-based violence, our conversation quickly shifted to the necessity of engaging more deeply and thoughtfully with the construction of masculinities. We recognized the importance of acknowledging the fluidity of gender identities and the diversity of gender expressions. Through Maraa's work, the potential for creating a transformative framework to engage with masculinity was too significant to overlook. Thanks to the positive response from the Edelgive Foundation, this work took shape, and the outcomes of these partnerships are now presented in the study you hold in your hands.

This study seeks to explore the complexities of masculine identities in our diverse society, illuminating the pressures and expectations imposed on those identifying as men within various contexts, and the implications these have for everyone, particularly, women and marginalized groups. As the gender and development discourse begins to engage with gender as a complex system of power relations — rather than merely equating gender with 'women' — there is a growing need to interrogate masculinities through the lens of intersectionality. This approach recognizes the multifaceted ways in which gender interacts with other identities including caste, class, and sexuality, enriching our understanding of power dynamics.

The conversation around masculinity, and to a lesser extent femininity — often positioned in an opposing dyadic relationship — has garnered increasing attention in both mainstream development discourse and academic research. As we acknowledge that gender is experienced and lived as a spectrum, it is vital to understand that this is not simply a matter of semantics. The language we use carries significant philosophical, ethical, and practical implications for gender relations.

The study eaffirms the idea that masculinity is not a universal construct. It is shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations that exert pressure on men, often with profound consequences for women, children, and the broader community. Understanding masculinity requires recognizing that it changes across time, socio-cultural contexts, and individual experiences, where men often perform their identities in diverse and

sometimes contradictory ways. This recognition highlights the malleable nature of masculinity, which evolves throughout one's life.

Traditionally, gender-driven development initiatives have focused primarily on women, often neglecting the ways in which masculinities shape the very contexts in which these changes are sought. This oversight has led to resistance from men who feel their authority is being challenged. Simultaneously, the dominant ideals of masculinity can entrap men in rigid roles, making them resistant to vulnerability or help-seeking behaviours. Both for funding agencies and development actors, this knowledge will mean profound shifts in praxis. For instance, a key intervention in gender equality work is to focus on behaviour change initiatives that promote positive masculinities. However, these interventions often lack a deep understanding of the historical and theoretical underpinnings of how 'masculine' behaviours emerge, become scripted into norms, and what it truly takes to change them.

By centering the lived experiences of men in the construction and performance of masculinity, this study invites us to inhabit the space between perception and experience, between identity and its performance, and perhaps between that which is seen as the 'natural' and the 'normal'. This exploration helps us see how the one becomes the many, and, in its multiplicity of forms, how we can envision transforming masculinity from its hegemonic, dominant, and harmful formations to a spectrum of possibilities that are inclusive, malleable, and complementary to an equitable social structure. The promise of this study also lies in its challenge to Western hegemonic constructions in the masculinity debate. By critically examining the unique context of South Asia, this study disrupts dominant paradigms in the construction of masculinity and advocates for a range of experiences and their frameworks.

These frameworks are essential for unpacking the various ways masculinity is constructed across social, political, geographic, and economic landscapes. The ethnographic detail and the nuanced interplay in the narratives presented in this report, along with the introspective reflections shared by the researchers themselves, remind us that as development actors, we each play a role in shaping the very systems we seek to change. Moreover, the emphasis by funders on programs that deliver short-term behaviour change — such as those focused on menstrual hygiene management or public space safety for women and girls — often fall short of creating transformative shifts. These initiatives may address immediate concerns but do little to challenge or shift harmful hegemonic gender norms that underpin these issues.

For development actors increasingly focused on "systems change", this study offers essential context for understanding how systems are influenced by power dynamics, social institutions, and cultural practices. By examining these interconnections, it reveals how masculinities are embedded within broader social frameworks and how they can both perpetuate and challenge existing inequalities. This understanding is crucial for fostering transformative change that is inclusive and equitable for all genders. This study advocates for a broader understanding of masculinity — one that embraces vulnerability, empathy, and collaboration, essential for cultivating healthier relationships and a more just society for us all. I hope the findings in this study will inspire us to collectively transform our practices in more relevant and creative ways.

Introduction

The motivation to work on this research study came from several years of work and conversations with feminist groups and women's rights organisations. As an arts and media collective, our work has involved research and documentation, film making, producing and facilitating theatre and radio processes, media training and curation. Perhaps, staying away from defining ourselves as an 'issue based' organisation, has allowed us to see the ways in which social categories interact with one another. We have learnt from feminism(s) emerging from lived experience, in various dialects, cultures, and political contexts. As we are situated in a diversity of contexts, our understanding of inequities and discrimination on the grounds of gender, sexuality, caste, class, and religion has allowed us to become more aware of the intersectionality between these social categories. There is no single story – we understand that life itself exists within complex, multiple, and ever-changing intersections – in stories and histories, rituals and festivals; in poetry, literature and music. In conversation with people from across social contexts in the country, we have heard stories of violence and discrimination, but also of resilience and creativity. The stories we have heard have continued to inspire and humble us, and we carry them with us, into the writing of this research study.

Why study masculinity? Everyone has experienced masculinity – or as it is colloquially known in large parts of North-Central India, 'Mardangi'– inside and around them. Our interest in studying masculinity emerged from conversations with women's rights organisations across the country over the last decade or so. These organisations have worked tirelessly across decades to challenge patriarchal violence within domestic, public, and work spaces; representation in the media, the courtroom and so on. In these spheres, women have fought back and broken apart from these systems in creative and resilient ways, seeking autonomy and freedom. As strategies to challenge the impunity of violence, to 'break the silence', several civil society groups created and expanded theoretical and practical frameworks to ensure that women's voices and experiences were heard. As the women's movement started to foreground sexual violence, livelihood concerns, the right to sexual and reproductive health etc., they also systematically started to dismantle the false division between the private and public, and ensure that the personal became a site for politics – political thought and political action.

Even as violence was being foregrounded as a systemic problem, the universality of women's experience was punctured by the critical scholarship and experience of Dalit feminists, feminists from minority religions, indigenous women, and transgender activists, who drew attention to the intersectional nature of violence itself. Thus, questions of systemic caste-based sexual violence, religious fundamentalism, wage disparity, and violence against sexual minorities became necessary to include within the ambit of feminist struggles, if we had to foreground the experiences of 'all' women. In response, organisations within the development sector began to shift their approach from a response/redressal mechanism to a 'prevention of violence' model. From crisis intervention and awareness programs, the approach expanded to include vocational training, media literacy, and leadership building etc., as pathways of empowering women to challenge casteist/Brahmanical patriarchy. These were important shifts because the emphasis was on the prevention of violence, and relating to women, as subjects of violence. This made it necessary to engage with the role of the men in this cycle of violence. To some extent, this might have been the seed that provided the necessary push to engage with masculinities within the development sector.

Initially, we did not find development sector programs focusing on masculinities as a concept, but more as a part of understanding violence against women, and therefore focused on changing the behaviours and attitudes of men – often, used as a shorthand for masculinities. Given that there was a concerted movement to visibilise and address the violence that women were experiencing, the figure of the 'man' within the discourse

was primarily that of a complicit spectator, a by-stander, or a perpetrator of violence. Programmatic approaches ranged from increasing legal convictions, to social boycotts, to community based, informal, resolution. Slowly, the focus began to move from a purely reactive framework, to one of prevention where organisations began thinking deeply about how to challenge and transform the behaviour of boys and men, across social contexts. The approaches shifted to understanding men as 'gendered beings', and creating spaces for dialogue on the power and privilege their gendered position afforded them in society. More recently, programmatic approaches have broadened to also address the diverse subjectivities of men, including engagement with vulnerability, peer pressures, self and societal expectations, desire etc. If it has to be summarised in one line, we can trace the journey of work on masculinities within the NGO sector as shifting from working with men as perpetrators, to allies, to beneficiaries. The intent of this study is to broaden this scope further, moving beyond individuating men, to understanding the interactions between individuals and systems and categories of power- namely class, religion, caste, labour and so on.

Perhaps, part of the reason for this lack of shift toward nuancing programmatic engagement around masculinities is because of fairly strong and stubborn assumptions that continue to exist. The first assumption could be that masculinity is the only identity that shapes the behaviour of men. This assumption conceals the way in which men are shaped by caste, class, religion, and so on. These identities fundamentally shape any expression of masculinity. Simply put, it is not gender alone that shapes masculinity. Another assumption could be that masculinity 'naturally' emerges from the bodies of men - just the way women are 'naturally' supposed to exhibit certain qualities such as obedience or sensitivity; men 'naturally' exhibit masculinity such as dominance, aggression, violence, and so on. This leads to the assumptions that all men are homogenous entities, and that masculinity is something universal and constant. This fails to take into account the multiple kinds of masculinities that are exhibited across genders, and further assumes that masculinity is only inhabited or exhibited by men. By taking masculinity as a constant, unvarying and stable characteristic of men, we fail to account for the performative aspect of gender itself - that is, that gender is socially assigned and 'performed' everyday through behaviours, gestures, rituals, and other everyday practices.

During the course of writing this study, our advisors Rumi Harish and Sunil Mohan urged us to approach gender not as an identity, but as an expression. This opens up the possibility of approaching gender as a set of socially scripted performances and to many different kinds of

'masculinities' as well as to the possibilities of resisting and challenging normative[1] masculinity.

Situating masculinities within a feminist framework

As mentioned above, the first recognisable framework of masculinities emerged from the feminist movement within a very specific context. In the 1980s, the fight for women's rights and dignity was being shaped by social and civil movements, drawing attention to the intersections of gender-based violence, livelihoods, caste positions, and access to health services. Since the movements were focused specifically on excavating women's lived experiences and creating a public discourse and debate about women's lives, they were not necessarily focused on masculinities. Apart from the fact that these movements often deemed 'men' to be a problem, especially in the context of violence against women, they were also wary about allocating the very limited resources that were available for women to work on masculinities. At the same time, some sections of the feminist and women's movement recognised that working with men and boys was an essential part of women's rights and gender-based work,

1. By normative, we refer to the type of masculinity that enjoys power and privilege in any given social context as it is considered the 'norm' to express one's gender identity in this way. A normative masculinity would in turn, define the limits of a normative femininity. In the course of the study, we have tried to unpack what constitutes the norm in different contexts.

especially if the violence against women had to stop. They strongly felt that 'masculinity' required a distinctive field of its own because this would be instrumental in ensuring a levelling of power relationships.

In the absence of male leadership that was feminist in its approach, those who engaged in conversations of masculinity were often women's rights' activists who were specifically interested in understanding masculinity, or a few feminist men who were likely to be privileged (in some form or another). As such, the discourse within the development sector on masculinities has historically run the risk of being narrowly focused on the normative ideal of masculinity, instead of engaging with multiplicities of masculinities that took into account the various intersectionalities of caste, class, religion etc. Further, in trying to map changes in masculinity (i.e. the behaviour of men), development sector approaches have overlooked stereotyping the identity of women. For example, a marker of 'positive' masculinity could be that men are participating in household chores, or sharing decision making power with women. However, while this challenges the usual masculine hierarchy of the household, it also reaffirms the gendered stereotypes about women being associated with the household, or being the 'domestic' figure.

As larger social movements that shaped gender dialogues started to contend with critical questions around the essentialist approaches to being a woman, or the universalising tendency of women's rights, the conversations around masculinity also started shifting away from an essential understanding of the figure of a 'man' to understanding the construction of 'masculinities'.

Perhaps, a more intersectional approach can trace the ways in which masculinities interact, shape and change each other, in continuum. Here, it is important to mention the contributions from sexuality movements, from transgender communities whose experiences challenged the biological foundation of gender and began to draw attention to how gender is scripted onto our bodies. As our advisors, Rumi Harish and Sunil Mohan always say, at birth we are 'male assigned' and 'female assigned' that is, gender is assigned/imposed on us. This began to complicate the neat division of masculinity as exhibited by 'biological' men and femininity by 'biological' women which is how gender continues to be popularly conceived. For example, from the experiences of transmen (elaborated further in this study), in the journey of transitioning into 'becoming a man' – can open up the possibility of multiple masculinities that the body can choose to hold, to enjoy, and to desire.

Adding another dimension to these expanding conversations on masculinity were the systematic resistance to feminist and women's movements that were led by Men's Rights Activists (MRAs). These activists

resisted the fundamental tenets of feminism (intersectional or otherwise), did not consider themselves affected by patriarchal structures, and instead felt victimised by feminist conversations around gender equality. Although recently embodied by hashtags such as #notallmen, men's activists were also actively resisting conversations around gender even in the 1990s with groups like Pirito Purush (The Persecuted Man) in Kolkata, Purush Hakka Samrakshan Samiti (Committee for the Protection of Men's Rights) in Mumbai, and Patni Atyachar Virodhi Morcha (Protesting Torture by Wives) in Lucknow[2]. They targeted laws that sought to promote the rights of women, including laws against dowry and cruelty. These groups have historically claimed that they are fighting against the injustice done to men because of affirmative action for women. Recently, these claims have resurfaced especially in the guise of 'Saving the Indian Family' from feminists who seek to destroy the sacred institution of marriage. One can argue that the MRAs are fighting to protect normative masculinity, in the name of tradition, that constructs any assertion from women as a threat to their power.

However, what could be useful to note is that across these approaches, masculinity is defined in universalist terms, which needs to either be celebrated or reformed. Not only does this approach overlook intersectionality of experience – that is, the ways in which caste, class, sexuality, religion, geography, language and so on – influence masculinity; they also do not necessarily engage with the articulation of masculinity and femininity in lived experiences. Especially in South Asian contexts, where there is an intersectional experience of caste, religion, geographical area, language, and gender that dictates social life, it is useful to produce more nuanced theoretical frameworks that speak to the multiplicity of these identities and the experiences that these identities dictate.

An intersectional approach is useful to consider also important because of the diversity of violence that is experienced by all who live within patriarchal structures, including men. We already have extensive documentation of the harm that patriarchy wrecks upon men's bodies, whether in terms of childhood sexual abuse, violence, exclusion, shame, stigma, or silence. Due to the fact that patriarchal structures are essentially about renegotiation of power within intersecting social identities of caste, class, religion and so on, it is important to move from simplistic conversations of who a man is (or should be) to unpacking the diversity of masculinities and its implications on people's lives. Within patriarchal cultures, normative

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2. https://feminisminindia.com/2023/06/01/the-rise-of-mens-rights-activism-in-india-a-feminist-issue-in-misogynist-garb/?ml_subscriber=2228279906221955180&ml_subscriber_hash=k1y9&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=lets_talk_about_the_rise_of_men_s_rights_activism_a_mix_of_patriarchy_and_gender_roles&utm_term=2023-06-02

(or hegemonic) masculinity is often embodied by men. However, as we will see, not all men ascribe to this masculinity and further, there are several kinds of masculinities that operate, depending on social contexts. Thus, our contention in this study is to start to think of masculinity not as the specific behavioural pattern of only men, but rather as a set of behaviours, practices, gestures, emotions, rituals etc. that are embodied across genders and change depending on social-cultural contexts.

Intent of the study | Toward multiple framings

We did not commence our research with a fixed definition of masculinity. In fact, as we will go on to see, it is fairly difficult to pinpoint what exactly masculinity (or femininity) is. Many times we found ourselves in heated discussions about whether there was an ontological maleness- is it tangible, like a glass or a table? In everyday life, there is, of course, a popular image of masculinity - the figure of the patriarch, able-bodied, dominant caste, fair-skinned, muscular, in control, strong, provider, and protector. Let us assume that this is the normative masculinity produced under patriarchy.

However, this is not and cannot be the only definition of masculinity. Rather than arrive at a definition, we have chosen to explore the messy terrain of masculinity, by drawing attention to the ways in which it is shaped by various other social identities like caste, sexuality, religion, indigeneity etc. We have also focused on the sites, mechanisms, and practices that sustain and legitimise certain forms of masculinity over the other, within patriarchal social contexts.

In short, what produces the norm?

At a reflective consultation we recently organised, a participant raised a pertinent question: what is the difference between patriarchy and masculinity? What we observe as masculine behaviour, is it not patriarchy in practice? If we define patriarchy as an ideology, then it accords power to bodies which are assigned male at birth, parental authorities, the state, the police, and other institutions that mandate the means of social production. Within patriarchy then, there are specific constructions of masculinity and femininity that become idealised and aspirational, for instance, heterosexuality, primacy given to dominant caste men, inheritance of property through men, the emphasis on marriage, and so on. As a result, some forms of masculinity are legitimised and other forms are considered deviant or subordinate. Thus, we can argue that patriarchy privileges specific kinds of masculinity, or seen the other way around, specific kinds of masculinity produce patriarchy. However, this is not

the only kind of masculinity that we encounter in our lived experience. Precisely because of the multiple masculinities that do continue to exist outside of patriarchy, we feel that normative masculinities can be challenged, resisted, and transformed.

In studying masculinity, we have paid attention to two facets. One, the **construction of gender** along lines of other forms of identity (like caste, region, sexuality); and second, the **performance of masculinity** (expression, gestures, attitude, body language, rituals, roles in familial life and desire, etc.) which, most dominantly, bodies assigned male at birth are expected to play out. By framing our analysis on construction and performance, we argue against the naturalness of gender, opening up spaces for resistance and re-scripting. Because of the interplay between gender, dominant caste relations, religious affiliations, and class interests, the masculinities that deviate from or contest hegemonic ideals[3] are met with resistance and violence. This corralling of people into specific bounded performances is not just restricted to men; instead, these have implications for everyone, including those who do not associate or are traditionally associated with hegemonic notions of masculinity. For example, hegemonic masculinity implies that the man must provide and protect the woman. Under the guise of safety, women's mobility is restricted and her sexuality controlled. At the same time, men from minority religions or lowered castes are often constructed as the 'other' by men from dominant caste/religions, again under the guise of protecting the honour of their women. Thus, the fields of power even within the hegemonic discourse shift constantly between who is considered dominant and who is considered marginal.

We have tried our best to stay away from collapsing each of the individuated categories into a centralised system of power. The idea is to recognise that multiple contradictory experiences can exist at the same time:

1. The idea, the concept, and the term *masculinity* has its root in gender, and as such, depicts a structured manner and pathway in which biological men are deemed superior to women, and
2. The idea, the concept and the experience of men who choose not to or cannot occupy this space designed or designated for them because of intersecting frameworks of power.

3. The notion of hegemony has its roots in the writing of Gramsci and is essentially a position of dominance attained through relative consensus rather than regular force, even if underpinned by force (Gramsci 1971). The consensus is one that is built among those who benefit from the promotion of masculinity, as well as many of those who are oppressed by it, notably women. Hegemonic masculinity is as much for women as for men a cultural ideal of manhood, which is rewarded by women's interests, attentions, and efforts to replicate this ideal in their male relatives and associates.

It is within this essential contradiction that we are contending that masculinities are multiple, fluid, and dynamic.

Our attempt in this study, therefore, is to:

1. Lay bare the construction of hegemonic/normative masculinities
2. Observe the ways in which masculinity is shaped by other identities
3. Highlight the multiple kinds of masculinities that exist in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

In our literature review, we observed that most research on masculinities within the development sector rests on an observation of lowered caste communities. This feeds into the stereotype that it is only these communities that exhibit traits of 'toxic masculinity' which fails to take into account the pressure and violence of structural conditions. In order to address this, we have written ourselves into the report, to depict our journey with gender and masculinity, from varied caste perspectives. We extended this to identify experiences of individuals from dominant caste/class/religious identities, where structures of family and community legitimise hegemonic masculinity. We have also included experiences of individuals from lowered caste communities/minority religions/sexualities to trace how these interact and resist hegemonic

power structures. Finally, through the ethnographies featured in this study, we have listened closely to the rhythms, rituals, and frictions of daily life, to see the subtle and mundane ways in which hegemonic masculinity is legitimised, as well as, the creativity and courage through which it is resisted. In tracing the masculinities that exist within us, in our families, communities, workplaces, we hope to find ways to resist power structures and find fresh ways to engage with the field of masculinities toward a shared goal of gender justice.

Finally, there is a need to pay attention to the politics of language. Translation is not only literal, but it is also about constructing meaning by keeping essence and context in place. As mentioned above, there has been an over-reliance on theories from the Global North to describe realities and experiences in the Global South. While translating these concepts, we searched for an equivalent word in the local language. Let us take the example of words like dominant, femininity and marginalised. In Hindi, while there are one word equivalents like 'Pradhan', 'Stritv' and 'Hashiye par', these are not colloquial words nor do they capture the essence of the argument when talking about 'dominant masculinity'. Another example could be 'hegemony' or 'toxic masculinity', these are terms that are difficult to translate to other languages in just one word. Each language carries its own experience of gender. For example, in Hindi there is limited vocabulary to talk about the body and its different parts. There might be metaphors to describe it, but not an exact translation. This becomes tricky when one is trying to construct an argument, for example, we argue that gender and sex must not be collapsed. Yet, in Hindi, the translation for both words is "ling'. An important part of the work moving forward then, is to make efforts to build a new vocabulary which is sensitive to local cultures, idioms, metaphors, and dialects. In the future, a significant part of our work will be toward translations from and in multiple languages to build a multi-lingual, polyphonic discourse around gender.

Methodology

Literature Review: The basis for this study was an extensive review of literature which aimed to understand the canvas of work that has been done on masculinities within the NGO sector. The literature review had two phases: a review of global theoretical frameworks that have been used to conceptualise work around masculinities as well as scholarship on masculinities within the Indian context (by no means exhaustive). The second phase included a thorough reading of reports produced by civil society organisations, research organisations, and donor agencies that have supported programmes on masculinities.

Interviews: We interviewed program directors/managers, and field staff, alongside twenty-four civil society groups across India, to reflect on their work on masculinities. Though not exhaustive, we have aimed to cover a diversity of geography, approaches, and scale of organisations.

Autoethnographies: Given that any experience of gender is personal as well as shaped by our interaction with the world, we chose autoethnography as a method that would allow the researchers to delve into their daily lives and produce detailed accounts of how masculinities manifest within themselves and in their social relationships. Rather than interviews, we felt that the researchers' own vocabularies, perceptions, and inquiries would be best reflected through written ethnographies that investigates their own lives in the context of the larger discourse around them. In order to do this systematically, researchers kept a journal and sent their notes weekly, in the form of handwritten/typed notes or voice recordings. The ethnographers were not professional researchers, but individuals who were keen on tracing their experiences of masculinity in and around them. We identified individuals who could cut across a wide spectrum of different identities and contexts. In spite of our differences, it was a friendly and sensitive group that allowed for a sharing of vulnerable experiences.

Writing workshops: In order to facilitate a collaborative ethnographic process, the researchers would gather each month for a workshop where we would collectively write and share our notes. This also provided a space for the researchers to listen to one another, debate, reflect, and present their own questions and preoccupations.

Co-analysis: In order to challenge the 'researcher-subject' power dynamic, we involved the eleven researchers in the analysis process. Each researcher produced codes or units of analysis for their own notes, and in certain cases, the researchers also coded each other's notes. These codes formed the basis of analysis and writing for the study, emerging from the researchers' own vocabularies and perceptions.

Writing ourselves in: We felt it was necessary to include the experiences of members working in Maraa who have contributed to the research study. This is an attempt to speak about our own social positions and challenge the objective neutrality that researchers often occupy within research processes.

Structure of the Study

We underwent several revisions in order to arrive at the final structure of the study. The way in which a text is framed has a heavy bearing on how the reader perceives its logic. We went through several iterations: demarcating based on sites (family, community, public space), themes (caste, religion, class) until we finally wiped the slate clean and laid out all the ethnographies. We did a collective reading from which emerged the current structure, where the focus is on the mechanisms and practices that construct and enable the performance of normative masculinities.

The first chapter 'Mardon Wali Baat' is a comprehensive attempt by Manak Matiyani to trace the trajectory of programming around masculinities in the development sector. In many ways, this chapter sets the tone for what we seek to address/challenge/re-imagine in the rest of the study.

The second chapter 'Man, Male, Masculine' seeks to complicate the linear logic between these three, by presenting reflections from the ethnographers that trace their own conformity and resistance to normative masculinity.

The next chapter 'Upholding Honour and Pride' traces the intimate relationship between masculinity and honour, particularly in the context of policing caste boundaries.

'Division of Labor/Laborers' looks at the way in which class, privilege and systems of production interact to produce masculinity.

The next chapter 'Difference and Stereotypes' delves into how the 'other' is produced and the ways in which 'difference' is constructed in order to create a system of exclusion and violence.

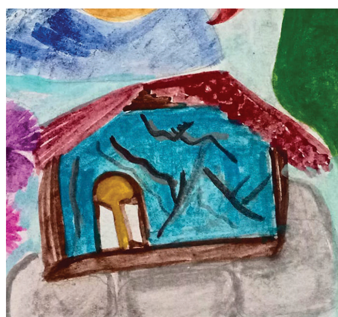
Finally, the chapter on 'Repetition and Performance' takes the site of rituals and festivals to trace how masculinity is performed through the act of repetition and ritualization, from which it derives legitimacy.

We hope this structure allows the reader to engage deeply with the ethnographies and find ways to have a conversation across chapters and themes, in order to truly realise the complex and contradictory nature of power that shapes our experience of masculinity and femininity.

Profile of Ethnographers

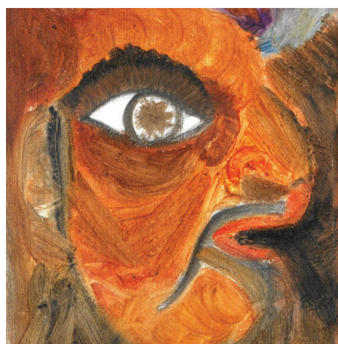
**Names have been changed to protect identity.*

Primary Researchers



Abdul has a long history of work as a trainer with young men, on issues of gender, masculinity and patriarchy. Riding between villages, spending long hours on his bike, he is committed to creating spaces for open and non judgemental conversations between young boys. Having grown up in a joint family, Abdul has challenged many gender norms within the home, fighting against conservatism, to ensure the rights of the women in his family. Soft spoken and analytical, Abdul brought a lot of depth to the study with his incisive observations on the everyday practices of caste and religious discrimination.

Dhananjay grew up in Anekal, on the outskirts of Bangalore. The rapid change in the landscape, from agriculture to industrialization has had a tremendous impact on him. Dhananjay comes from an OBC community. Coming from an OBC community, Dhananjay has always questioned what he perceives as the conservatism and discrimination in his community. With a quiet resistance to the injustice he sees around him, Dhananjay works with a feminist organisation and spends his days engaging with young people from different community contexts. Dhananjay is soft spoken and sensitive, a keen observer of life around him.



Tall, with eyes that twinkle, **Jackson** grew up in Simdega, Jharkhand. He is passionate about his community, and feels that issues pertaining to tribal communities are largely under-represented and misunderstood. He has been active in local politics, to ensure access of resources, education and livelihood, for the people of Simdega. With a large and open heart, Jackson's house is always welcoming to anyone who is in need of shelter. Jackson had a very different set of

perspectives and reflections to share on gender relations, which greatly enriched the conversation among all of us.

Neelam is an independent journalist reporting on issues of gender and violence in Uttar Pradesh. Originally from Kanpur, she migrated to Lucknow where she now lives and works. Neelam is from an OBC community, and she describes her community as conservative and restrictive, particularly toward women. Neelam is an outlier, having charted her own path in living away from home, being financially independent, and ensuring education for herself and her sisters. In spite of daily misogyny and sexism within the media, she has risen to become an award winning journalist. Standing tall against societal norms, Neelam writes her own destiny.

Rachel is a feminist, writer, facilitator and mother, living in Pune. She juggles multiple roles simultaneously. She is an active part of a women's network that enables women's leadership and challenges patriarchy, sexism, and abuse within religious institutions. The energy to do this work comes from her own struggles at home, fighting against conventions of being an 'ideal woman', to carve a space for herself. Her participation in this research study has helped her reflect and address the violence she has faced. Deeply emotional and passionate, Rachel always has a smile on her face, and can counter any form of discrimination with her witty one-liners.

Raghu grew up in Dharwad, in North Karnataka, but moved to Bangalore about four years ago for higher studies and work. Sceptical and passionate, Raghu is now an aspiring writer. He belongs to an OBC community, and is critical about his own family's rituals and practices, with the exception of his aunt, with whom he shares a beautiful friendship. Raghu never aspires for consensus and is comfortable in disagreeing with the popular opinion. An avid watcher of cinema, Raghu had long been observing the ways in which popular cinema constructs gender norms, which led him to focus on social media

and popular culture as a primary site of study, for this report. When not online, Raghu can be found cuddling cats.

Ramesh delivers milk in the morning, works as an insurance agent in the day and runs a theatre group in the evening. Having grown up in Indore, in a dominant caste family, Ramesh has always questioned his position in society. Never satisfied with easy answers, he is on a journey of constant reflection, of learning and unlearning. Self critical, his writing unpacks what it means to be a 'man' through minute observation of himself and his surroundings. With a voice well-suited to a radio jockey, Ramesh greatly enriched our group conversations with his curiosity and scepticism.

Roop is originally from Haryana, but her family migrated to Hyderabad generations ago. Given the difference in language, appearance, cultural norms, she often feels like she occupies the position of an insider-outsider. Roop's family was forced into manual scavenging, due to their caste identity. She is the first in her family to carve a space for herself outside the limits of identity. She is proud to work for a feminist organisation that fights for the rights of lowered caste and working class women and girls, in the old city of Hyderabad. She responds to the difficulties she has faced with sarcasm and a unique sense of humour, refusing to be seen as a victim. In addition to her work, she wants to explore stand-up comedy as a way of sharing the life experiences of women like her.

Ruby grew up in the old city of Hyderabad. One of the younger researchers within the group, she is filled with questions about her own life, in particular, the restrictions on young girls and women. This led her to work with a feminist organisation that fights for the dignity of Dalit and Muslim women. Having grown up experiencing and witnessing various kinds of rules and regulations, Ruby dreams of a life that she can live on her own terms. Ruby is deeply reflective, always willing to consider another point of view. Having observed various kinds of injustice

within the communities she works , she wishes to grow up to be a role model for girls like her, who hope to live a life free of discrimination.

Sonia is from a district in Uttar Pradesh, and works for an organisation that seeks to foster constitutional values, against caste and religious discrimination and politics of hate. Sonia belongs to a dominant OBC caste in that area, and has grown up resisting all the norms enforced on women in her community. She has taken a strong stand against religious intolerance, caste discrimination and violence against women, many times, risking her own life. She works as a community level activist and a block officer in the local municipality, which gives her a chance to interact with people across the caste and gender spectrum. She occupies public space fearlessly, and is vocal in her views. With her red lipstick and bright clothes, Sonia is a force to reckon with.

Suresh is an activist and writer, who grew up in Kerala and has spent most of his life living and working in Bangalore. With a quiet smile on his face, Suresh has systematically questioned the norms that restrict the expression of gender. Suresh identifies as a trans man, and his journey has been difficult, lonely and full of various kinds of discrimination. Through it all, he has held himself with dignity and resilience which has won him the respect of various people within the sexual minority and feminist movement. With an expansive imagination of friendship, love and work, Suresh refuses to be confined by any label. His life experience unsettled many of the initial assumptions in the study, and greatly enriched our own perceptions of gender and sexuality.

Secondary Researchers

**Interviews were conducted with the following people for specific sections in the report.*

Mausam lives in Bangalore, Karnataka. She grew up in Hyderabad and her family is originally from Uttar Pradesh. Mausam is a researcher, facilitator, and translator, working on issues of gender, caste, and violence. Her background is in mainstream journalism and

she has engaged for several years with community broadcasting. Mausam comes from a dominant caste community where the boundaries are tightly drawn, especially for women. She has questioned the ways in which a woman's existence is imagined in her community. Through her work she is beginning to understand the intersectionality of caste, gender, religion, and class. She wishes to explore this further through theatre and dance. Mausam also enjoys listening to old Hindi songs and reading short stories.

Rita grew up in an inter-religious and inter-caste family, in Bangalore. Her experiences in childhood influenced her greatly, making her acutely sensitive to differences in social location and privilege. She works in an arts and media collective, as a facilitator, researcher, and curator and is also an independent film-maker. Rita is inspired by the strong women in her family, who she always remembers as standing tall against different kinds of masculine forces. Rita feels each person holds masculine and feminine qualities within them but social norms don't allow for their free exploration. Rita is committed to fighting against discrimination, toward a more free and equitable society. When not travelling on work, Rita enjoys watching slow cinema, observing trees, and spending time with her cats.

Rohan is free spirited, reflective, and restless. Having grown up in Agra, he migrated to Delhi and recently the US to complete his PhD. Identifying as gay, Rohan still struggles to express himself fully to his family and friends. He hopes to reconstruct the world through his writing and storytelling. He is critical about his own position, as well as any form of social convention and rigidity. With a wicked sense of humour, Rohan is always ready to laugh at himself and the world around him. He is sensitive to discrimination, and always tries to make space for ways of seeing and being that are unknown to him.

Leela describes herself as a jack of all trades and master of none. A masters student in Bangalore, she is also a writer, poet, singer, and video maker, who is constantly reinventing herself. Having grown up in a dominant caste, with a right-wing family, Leela is in the process of questioning her own privilege, and exploring beyond what

appears as the truth. Leela is always open to changing her ways of seeing and has the ability to strike up a conversation with anyone.

Sridhar grew up in Delhi, and now lives in Bangalore. His family is originally from Udupi, a town in coastal Karnataka. Having grown up in a right-wing, dominant caste family, Sridhar left home early, to chart his own course. He studied media and communications, and worked for several years on community broadcasting. Having completed his PhD, Sridhar now hopes to write a book exploring these issues further. As a practising academic, he hopes to unsettle dominant categories through his writing, and discover connections that are usually ignored. When Sridhar doesn't have his nose buried in a book, he can be found watching Telugu escapist cinema or quietly smoking a cigarette.

Vinod is from Dharwad in North Karnataka, but migrated to Bangalore for higher education and work. Vinod is a theatre and film practitioner and a writer. He comes from a family of writers, poets and artists, which has made him question his own privilege and cultural capital. Critical of any form of dominant masculinity, Vinod desires to unsettle dominant gender norms through his creative practice. He is also a singer and a painter who enjoys cooking and feasting.

MARDON WALI BAAT
MATTERS OF MEN

By Manak Matiyani

Masculinities programmes entered the field of gender and women's rights much like how men and boys stray into sessions for women and girls on ground; curious, but unsure. The initial reason to start working with men and boys in the development sector was the same as in the sessions where they would show up outside; they were too much of a nuisance to ignore. Consequently, for a long time, while work with men and boys had begun, neither programme designers and funding organisations, nor field implementers knew quite what to do with them once they were there. Women's rights work looked at men only in their relevance and roles as the privileged gender and other sectors did not address men as gendered beings at all. It is somewhere between this singular focus on gender-based violence prevention, and the gender-blind imagination of livelihoods, agriculture, labour, caste, communalism, or skilling-related issues, that the range of approaches to working with men and boys has played out. The shifts, intent, and resource allocation in this regard have been slow and often contentious. They are rife with ethical questions, ideological dilemmas, and political disagreements in addition to the pressures of effective indicators and measuring impact. Approaches to this work include capacity building, campaigning, the use of traditional, digital and social media as well as arts, sports, and other methods.

Across these diverse interventions and approaches, the question plaguing the lives of boys and young men has not changed. 'What is masculinity?' remains the important question for men and boys, when they encounter the one-off gender session that does address them. They wish to perform masculinity as best as possible, to secure their cool quotient and dominance in the social hierarchy of their communities and peer groups. The crisis of masculinity remains the gap between having a sense of entitlement to power, but not the experience. Power is set up as a reward for winning the competition of performing the hegemonic masculinities of the time and context best. In the real world however, power is mediated through various intersecting identities of caste, class, gender and sexual conformity, as well as bodily ability, among others. My interest is that of an intervener engaged in the process of transformation of individuals as well as social structures that privilege certain expressions of masculinity over others.

My location and influences

My engagement with work on gender and masculinities has been multidisciplinary more by chance than by intention. I discovered feminist writing and theory as an undergraduate student of English literature with much joy. It felt like a range of feelings I had been feeling had been named and validated. The idea of equity in relationships did not feel like a betrayal of masculinity. Queerness and masculinity could be experienced

simultaneously with joy. To someone relegated to the peripheries of high school machoness, this felt like home. Post Graduate education in media further solidified my understanding and intentional choice of feminist politics. Making documentary films gave me a reflective awareness of my own gender location. I took all these lessons to my work as a trainer and facilitator of direct interventions on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) prevention with young people. Exposure to feminist movements and interventions and subsequent work on GBV prevention sparked off my personal as well as political thinking around masculinities. I realised that the much-quoted joke rang true. 'A feminist man walks into a bar, he finds it very low.' Young men working on gender were rare and much in demand. Everyone wanted young men on the panel. Public actions on women's rights led by men were much better media material than the women-led movements saying the 'same old stuff' for decades. The field of Gender-Based Violence Prevention was propped up for manspreading if one was not restrained and reflective.

Development dilemmas

I experienced the friction between women's rights activism and development interventions first hand at a panel discussion on working with men and boys at a conference on Gender-Based Violence prevention in 2013. At the end of the discussion, a women's rights activist raised two critical points that mirrored the worrying trends of the sector at the time. First, that convening for reflection and intervention design on issues of women's rights and gender was being led and anchored more and more by regional and international organisations. They then decided who would get space or be invited. Second, she noted the political choice of making the first discussion at a conference on interventions on women's rights and gender about masculinities and working with men and boys.

She saw it as symbolic of a larger shift in resource allocation towards working with men instead of investment in women's rights. In a competitive funding model, this meant making a choice about who to fund, and which share of the pie to cut thinner. A larger question in this regard was whether work with men and boys was to remain a subset of women's rights and gender justice work, or become a larger distinctive field of its own. A question that remains unanswered in a status quo maintained perhaps due to the lack of funding interest in men in and of themselves. Riddled with these dilemmas, the work with men and boys in the 2000s saw an almost binary divide between interventions that sought to 'engage men and boys', and those that encouraged 're-examining masculinities'. This was the next phase in the curious and unsure development of interventions with men within the sector. It gave us more reflective questions than emphatic answers about working on masculinities. But as Maya Angelou said, 'You don't know where you're going until you know where you've been'. It is useful to trace the trajectory of gender programming alongside parallel, but not always related shifts in theoretical engagement with gender and society from the 1950s.

The HIStory of interventions on gender and masculinities

The decade from the 1950s onwards saw a shift from gender-blind programming to gender specificity in development programmes for women. This was reflected in the initiation of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the incorporation of women's rights and gender programmes, and the work of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Across the 60s and 70s, the sector pushed to highlight inequalities and demanded equal

participation and rights for women. This was supported by a similar call and focus in the second-wave feminist movements between the 60s till the 80s. Approaches to development went through multiple iterations moving from Women In Development (WID) which focused on economic empowerment initiatives, to Women And Development (WAD) which acknowledged other factors impacting women's lack of power and called to build women's leadership. The notion of men as the dominant gender influenced the way feminist approaches positioned the need to empower and support women. Increasing evidence of Violence Against Women (VAW) also heightened the focus on equality and the positioning of men as either those holding power and resources, or as perpetrators of violence.

This shift to Gender And Development (GID) in the 80s broadened the purview of interventions to look at gender and society and not just women. There was an increasing consciousness to incorporate an understanding of women's diversities and the social construction and implications of gender into the designs of programmes. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and entered into force in 1981. CEDAW became a significant tool for promoting women's rights and gender equality internationally. The focus on men as perpetrators remained, however, there was the new positioning of men's support to the cause of gender equity as allies. The rise of the queer movement in the 1980s brought to prominence non-binary gender expressions.

The tentative focus on engaging men which had been developing slowly, received a definitive push in the 90s. The emergence of queer studies and the third wave of feminism in the 1980s and 1990s brought to light intersectional inequalities. Hence, masculinities emerged more strongly as an analytical category to understand the gender hierarchies that exist within men. The gender-responsive approach of the 1980s shifted towards gender transformative programmes in the 90s. Within the development sector, the Beijing platform for action became an important global platform that articulated a call to work with men toward gender equity. The approach to engaging men was broadened to look at men in their diverse roles, particularly those of supporting and providing care. There was a move to highlight positive masculinities and engage men as partners in ending Violence Against Women. Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA), one of the first exclusive initiatives to engage men and boys against violence against women, was launched in this decade.

The most influential framework to analyse masculinities was provided by the Australian queer theorist/sociologist R W Connell who used Gramsci's concept of hegemony to understand how dominant forms of masculinity

are constructed, maintained, and reproduced in society vis-à-vis other forms (subordinate, complicit, and marginalised masculinities). This model emphasised the relational nature of masculinities, highlighting how different forms of masculinity interact and shape each other within social contexts. It recognized that masculinities are not fixed or universal but are constructed and negotiated through power dynamics, social institutions, and cultural practices. The model also had several criticisms that prompted Connell and James Messerschmidt to reformulate their initial framework.

The Hegemonic Masculinities framework itself became hegemonic within theoretical and development work on masculinities. While Connell's model offers valuable nuance, its application to South Asian contexts requires careful consideration of cultural specificity, intersectionality, historical factors, patriarchal structures, and the fluidity of masculinities in the region. Its origins in a Western context overlook specific intersectionalities, particularly caste, that have a deep impact on both the construction and performance of masculinities in South Asia. Crenshaw's work on intersectionality was another big theoretical development that influenced the way development programmes were designed and evaluated. Addressing specific diversities and related oppressions became an important practice as well as a reflective challenge to the feminist movements and development programmes as they had existed till then.

Both development work, as well as theoretical approaches to masculinities and gender, became solidified into definitive fields in the 2000s. A push in funding led to the initiation of much new work within the sector, particularly in India, but also across the region. The setting up of Partners For Prevention (P4P) as a joint regional UN programme led to research as well as media and capacity-building interventions that brought masculinities to the forefront as a new hot topic. Coordinated by P4P, a five-country study on men and violence in Asia and the Pacific provided new insight into men's understanding of gender and masculinities as well as the perpetration of violence. This encouraged the initiation of a plethora of interventions in India including the setting up of the Men's Action for Stopping Violence Against Women (MASVAW) network, Oxfam and Population Council's Yaari Dosti Campaign, the Parivartan Programme by ICRW the South Asian Network to Address Masculinities (SANAM), various curricula and training based interventions by the Center for Health and Social Justice and Sahyog, Bell Bajao Campaign by Breakthrough, the Must Bol Campaign by Commutiny – The Youth Collective as well as other curricula-based capacity building interventions.

These interventions began to address men as bystanders, interveners against violence, caring partners, supportive husbands and fathers, or as community role models demonstrating 'positive masculinities'. Borrowing

from Connell, the notion of diverse masculinities became fairly structured within development interventions and the effort was to encourage and highlight positive masculinities or positive traits of masculinities, as against what Connell described as 'toxic' ones. Many of the interventions took up sexual harassment, domestic violence, and sexual violence as core issues. In addition, intimate partner violence in premarital relationships, gender inequitable attitudes, and stereotypes also became popular subjects of behaviour change interventions.

By 2015, these developments brought the work with men and boys and on masculinities to a state of readiness to branch out into a distinctive field. However, this work did not really expand beyond the few and faithful who had remained in the fray from the start. The binary approaches to working with men, boys, and masculinities have continued to prevail in the sector till today, both with clear logic, needs, and contexts.

Boys in binaries

So what is this binary approach?

'Engaging Men and Boys' addresses them as allies or partners to prevent violence against women or gender-based violence. Organisations working with this approach typically have a history of addressing violence against women. Their funding as well as organisational or programmatic goals are focused on women's rights. The approach is highly relevant in communities and contexts where they have been working with women and girls and need to create a supportive ecosystem for leadership and empowerment to be sustained beyond the intervention. Support for employment after education and addressing patriarchal norms of control in communities where interventions for skilling or employability of women are taken up are examples of this approach. The criticism of this approach is mainly that it instrumentalises men to only think about the condition of women, without enough reflection on the impact of gender and patriarchy on their own choices and lives. It does not take into account the idea that masculinities are constructed and performed in relations and interactions between men and other men as well.

In that, the externalised call to reduce violence against women without a personal transformation of attitudes towards gender and masculinity might be short-lived and limited in scope. Many programmes that use this approach take up gender training as a method to exhort men to lead public actions against women. In the absence of sufficient reflective input, this sometimes ends up putting men at the helm of public dialogue on violence against women. Within a culture of invoking masculinity for protection

of mothers and sisters, this easily becomes an aggressive public debate between men; quite the opposite of what feminist interventions aspire to achieve. In my experience as a facilitator, I have found men quick in taking charge of public actions. It is, they have been taught, their natural bent. Most often, they design actions and messages about respecting women as mothers, sisters, wives, or worse, goddesses. There is little space in interventions, to move away from public actions and prioritise reflection, improve emotional responsiveness and create dialogue about vulnerability, rejection and insecurities. In interventions that I have led and designed, men took a lot of time not just in expressing vulnerabilities themselves, but also in allowing other men to showcase vulnerabilities without making jokes or deriding them. It was to infuse training based work with reflective practice that many organisations in the late 90s focused on men's roles and relationships and their public leadership to change the narrative around those with other men. A plethora of campaigns focused on men as better partners and fathers, sharing domestic and care work. This is where the other approach of reflective re-examination of masculinities became most relevant.

The invitation to re-examine masculinities, is more concerned with the construction and performance of gender roles, norms of masculinity and a deeper engagement with men and the many aspects of their

lives. A significant aspect of this approach is reflected in the shift of language from talking about masculinity to masculinities. This harks back to Connell's language around the existence of hegemonic and other masculinities, and an invitation to examine the power hierarchies between these, instead of only looking at the power dynamic between men and women. This approach seeks to create reflection on how gender and patriarchy impact men's attitudes, behaviours, and engagement with multiple spaces and roles in which they find themselves. It takes an intersectional understanding of violence and recognises that merely addressing gender-based violence or violence against women will not change the hegemony of aggressive and violent masculinities. It is relevant in programs that address norm change through deep work with men and boys towards improving their gender-equitable attitudes and addressing the crisis and anxiety around masculinity. The challenge this faces is of propping up men as victims of patriarchy without an acknowledgment or comprehensive understanding of their own privilege or the violence they perpetrate. As this approach gained ground in the late 90s and early 2000s, it was supported by Partners for Prevention, a joint regional programme by multiple UN agencies. One of the initial experiments in this regard was the South Asia Masculinities Project that supported the creation of films on masculinities in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India. Rahul Roy's documentary film, 'Where Four Friends Meet' (Jahan Chaar Yaar) was supported by this initiative and was one of the most popular tools used to take up discussions on gender and masculinities with young men and boys, at least in North India. The film looked at the personal and intimate worlds of men with a focus on their relationships with each other. The film, just as the approach to working on masculinities looked at diverse aspects of men's lives including work and employment, friendships, sexual explorations and romance as key experiences that lead to the construction of masculinity as an idea and also where masculinities are performed. The aim of the film was to initiate discussion and spark reflective, internal facing action among boys and men. The hope was that a deeper reflection on masculinities and their links to violence will bring about a broader attitude shift towards rejecting violence. In direct work, this meant enabling men and boys to question the idea of masculinity as a given, in favour of understanding masculinities as a choice that they make consistently and in certain kinds of contextual pressures.

The use as well as an understanding of both these approaches has been established within the sector since the early 2000s. Many interventions included aspects of both. However, it came with certain sectoral challenges. Most organisations working within a feminist framework to address gender and patriarchy acknowledge the various aspects of both

these approaches. One of the key challenges in focusing on re-examining masculinities is the donor and sector-level focus on the reduction of violence against women and gender-based violence. There have been interventions that see these not as binaries that require choosing one or the other, but as polarities in service of the same cause (ending patriarchy) that need to be managed together.

This requires ensuring that interventions are able to gain from the positives of both and avoid the limitations. It is with this idea that we should re-look at interventions with men and on masculinities in the world of today.

Boys just want to have funds

While I have mentioned briefly the role played by funding patterns and the shifting approaches within the development sector in shaping work on masculinities, a more direct look at this aspect is useful. The emergence of the field in India, was shaped not only by development funding, but the stances of women's rights organisations in taking funding to work with men.

In the 1990s, the United Nations and various international organisations started acknowledging the significance of involving men and boys in gender equality and GBV prevention initiatives. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, recognized men as 'partners in advancing gender equality and equity' and called for their active involvement in addressing GBV. Following this, development agencies, governments, and Civil Society Organisations began incorporating programs that specifically included men and boys in their gender equality and GBV prevention strategies. Development funding started to be allocated to support projects focused on engaging men and boys as allies and advocates in the fight against GBV. The work on engaging men got housed in the specific fields of women's rights, violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health and rights work. The latter included interventions on family planning, fatherhood and the role of men as husbands and partners as well as HIV prevention and SRH awareness interventions. It should, therefore, be acknowledged that notable investment in the field or working with men and boys came from health and gender funding. This is why the field has developed within these two sectors, and in a way, remained limited therein in terms of multi-disciplinarity.

One notable example of development funding in this area is the MenEngage alliance, a global network of NGOs, academics, and activists working to engage men and boys in achieving gender equality and preventing GBV.

MenEngage received support from various development agencies, such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The Global Network fostered the development and creation of the Forum to Engage Men (FEM) as the India Network in 2007. While the focus remained on violence prevention, perhaps for the first time, there was a coordinated and multi-faceted approach to working with men with a gender lens across different sectors and fields.

Within women's rights work, the idea of focusing on men was fraught due to two reasons. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, slicing the funding for women's rights to make space for working with men was seen as a detriment to expanding women-led work. Secondly, in the absence of men's networks and feminist male activists taking up this new field (in the 90s), this put the burden of engaging and working with men on to women leading the field. This also, in a way, contributed to the use of existing frameworks and pedagogies on gender equity, as well as facilitating change on ground with women in the work with men. Gradually, with the increasing focus on engaging men as allies, supporters, better partners, and finally, reflective, gentle role models of positive masculinities, this work was taken up by organisations that focused on working with men and boys as part of their mandate. 'Gender Transformative Approaches' is where the development sector met the theoretical discourse on examining masculinities. The focus became on transforming attitudes and inner work with men and boys. There was a recognition of certain organisations and activists (including few from India) who led the field of interventions with men and boys globally. Evaluation and learning processes in the sector, particularly in the field of health programming, generated insights on the need for different approaches and pedagogies to work with men and boys. It demonstrated the effectiveness of investment on transforming attitudes and the need to combine community and media outreach with direct interventions to make change processes more effective and sustained.

The gap that remained however, was the integration of the gender and masculinities lens in work with men across other sectors and disciplines. While there was an increasing and welcome focus on a masculinities approach to work on gender and health with men, issues like labour, agriculture, infrastructure development, education, and all others within the development sector remained aloof from the insights on how masculinities shape almost all aspects of men's lives.

So what is ‘masculinity’ today?

Despite large shifts in the contexts where they navigate gender norms, the top question for men and boys remains the same: ‘What is masculinity?’ (or Mardangi kya hai?, as I have often been asked in Hindi working in the north). Global development and global crises over the past decade have completely changed the way we live and engage with the world. However, the epigram ‘The more things change, the more they remain the same’ by Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr rings true. While there is a range of new spaces and modalities that shape the lives of men, older systems like caste, religion, class, bodily ability, and gender continue to exert their influence, fixing power, entitlement, and privilege in all these new avenues. Social media has become a significant site of contestation particularly because of the rapidly growing access, at least for men. It offers new tools and platforms for diverse masculinities to exist in public but also for hegemonic masculinities to re-assert their dominance. Men’s rights activists continue to soldier on and there are new movements against sexual rights and bodily autonomy. These include new religious oppositions to sexual and gender diversity as well as to abortion rights. There is much more immediate, organised, and violent online backlash when talking about toxic masculinities or issues of caste-based violence, communal violence, or gender diversity online.

The systematic investment to set up what is variously called 'Whatsapp university' has given us the opposite of media literacy. There is widespread disregard and suspicion towards formal and established media and news and overreliance and faith on social media-based information whether in the form of WhatsApp forwards or on other digital media platforms. Social media 'influencing' has emerged as a new currency that has both diversified gender expression and performance as well as heightened hate, public negativity, and misinformation. The struggle to control and shape social media discourse either through the use of law and regulation or through the narrative of 'hurt sentiments' is evidence of the growing influence and importance of the online, for shaping mindsets and behaviour.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a range of mental health issues and crises but has also enabled conversation about mental health for all across fields and sectors. While the field of mental health continues to be stigmatised, there is a growing community of YouTubers and social media influencers offering paid courses and resources for young men and boys to learn how to deal with 'masculinity'. While the options available might not be worth recommending, it is important to note the changing modalities of the market bringing masculinities and mental health to the forefront. A task that has been an uphill battle within the development sector to date.

Within the field of working with men, boys, and on masculinities, there are new insights into how masculinities are shaped by caste, class, disability, and religion. We have more varied research that frames men and boys as subjects in and of themselves and not just in relation to their attitudes towards women and their perpetration of violence. It is clear that the category of 'men' cannot remain limited to cis-heterosexual experiences. Neither can a homogenous young, able-bodied, privileged caste male be used as a model participant. The existence of varied work on labour, caste, adolescent health, and sexual and reproductive health, is able to inform work with men and boys in the arena of gender-based violence and masculinities.

In this context, the present research study provides a useful landscape covering experiences of civil society intervention-making as well as those of individuals directly, as they navigate the current world in all its complexities. It lays out the range of spaces that shape men and masculinities in the context of their interactions with issues of caste, religion, bodily ability, gender identity, sexuality, and class. Technology, nationalism, engagement with party politics, family, and community as well as intimate and romantic relationships are sites of contestation where masculinity is affirmed or challenged. It provides a nuanced overview, delving into examples of how caste interacts with sexuality and body image or how social media becomes a site for holding power, albeit, through the proliferation and control of misinformation. It indicates clearly the gaps in addressing caste as a fundamental aspect of masculinities and states the challenge that majoritarian, right-wing Hindutva politics places before the aspirations of making gentle, more sensitive, and empathetic masculinities the norm. Relationships and love continue to be key sites of contestation between desire, love, and social sanction. Inter-religion and inter-caste relationships are fraught with the political sanction to structural and direct violence against such couples today. Other research with young men has shown how social media access is currency as well as a site to engage men and boys in the protection of their caste, community and religion.

There is a clear acknowledgment of the need to move away from the reliance on the hegemonic masculinities model. Its limited ability to address complex intersections of identities and experiences has been highlighted in both interventions as well as research. There is also a legacy of past attempts to formulate a distinctively South Asian perspective on the construction and performance of masculinities and address the same in interventions. This includes the recognition of the centrality of caste in the formulation and expression of masculinities for all men. There seems to be an interest in domestic funding to invest in and develop work on

masculinities and with men and boys in its diversity, and the bandwidth and experience among implementers to take this on.

Given the understanding of these realities today, there is much potential in moving the field forward, taking them into account. There is new excitement in going back to my old question today: What does men's feminist leadership look like? It necessitates addressing these multiple intersections when including acknowledgment of privilege, giving up leadership space, and following the leadership of those who are oppressed and made vulnerable as critical aspects of this leadership. What is needed to build such a leadership? The experience so far gives us both valuable questions as well as clear directions for the future of our work.

A related question then, is: Where is men's feminist leadership needed? as we see a huge proliferation of physical and online spaces that contribute to the formulation of masculinities and become sites of their expression. Ranging from the family WhatsApp group to remotely engaged education, workplaces to private sector and global systems of production to political movements, media discussions as well as, and of course, civil society.

In a world built on patriarchal masculinist systems, this means pretty much everything. Gender relations then become a very narrow and limited part of what needs transformation within this work. It necessitates addressing all those fields where men continue to engage with a gendered lens. The 'field' of our work within communities and groups of men and boys also needs expansion. Communities of men are everywhere. Not just within 'marginalised and oppressed' communities but all those who have the power to marginalise and oppress so that they transform the way in which they use their power. So as we assess where we are in our work with men and boys at the moment, let us use this reflective pause to imagine new horizons for this work. As men engage with and in all these spaces, the feminist leadership-building project seems most urgent and relevant. The need for it is clear and the field is ripe and ready for action.

Man, Male, Masculine: Re-examining Gender Constructions

By Angarika Guha

The etymology of masculinity comes from the Latin word 'masculus', meaning simply – male, or the male body. The traditional association of men with masculinity, therefore, at least in English, is fairly strong. However, does masculinity only emanate from men's bodies? Is there a kind of masculinity that we know of that can be attributed to all men, irrespective of differences in social context? Decades of feminist praxis have shown that there is in fact no 'natural' link between biological sex and gender identity. Gender is a social script that is assigned to biological sex; most conventionally, the male sex is socialised into behaving like men, and the female sex is socialised into behaving like women. Crucially, this process of socialisation differs from context to context. For example, what it means to be a woman is very different in western countries, in comparison to the way in which women are expected to behave in the global south.

Yet, there is unease. In spite of recognizing that gender is a social construct, the link between sex and gender expression continues to persist in many discourses. There is a tendency to perceive masculinity only in relation to men, and further, insisting on a singular type of masculinity as the only one. The first images that pop up when we respond to masculinity are the tropes and images of muscles, body hair, aggression and/or entitlement. Of course, these images are not entirely untrue.

We continue to encounter them in our daily lives, particularly, within the Indian subcontinent. Yet, it need not be the only image of masculinity. So we asked ourselves, can masculinity be dissociated from the bodies of men in our thinking and writing?

Given the social and cultural context in which we live in, it is difficult, on an every-day basis to constantly unlink the ideas of masculinity from the stable and real male body, even as we reject the very idea of a singular story of masculinity or femininity. This gets especially hard when we have to acknowledge the real benefits accrued to men of a particular caste, class, and religious category, simply because they inhabit the body of a particular kind of man. However, precisely because the dominant idea of masculinity systematically erases all other forms of subjective experience, it becomes necessary to examine *how* social structures produce particular kinds of masculinity and femininity, shaping the behaviour of individuals and communities, while also being attentive to *how* individuals break from the mould of social expectations. This means that even if we were to study *only* the behaviour of men, there is no blanket idea of masculinity that such a group represents. Far from being a universal phenomenon, masculinity is constantly being marked by social context and social difference.

This leads us to a related thought. While masculinity might, in many cases, be expressed by men, it is also not the *only* discourse operating on the bodies of men. Men are also identified by their caste, religion, class, language, and so on. Both these points also hold true for femininity and the way in which it operates on and via the bodies of women. Consequently, gender is marked by many more social facets than just gender expression, and thereby, a study of multiple masculinities provides us a glimpse into the interwovenness of these social structures in everyday life.

So far so good. But what about the niggling question of what *exactly* constitutes masculinity, if we are to expand its scope from the biological arena? There is a tendency, we argued between ourselves, to ascribe anger, dominance, aggression, control to masculinity, and the act of nurturing, caring, kindness, vulnerability to femininity. Yet in the course of our lives, we all have experienced men, women, and people across genders, displaying all of these emotions. One cannot say that all men are aggressive, as much as one cannot say that all women are kind. This implies that masculinity and femininity become insufficient terms if they are deemed to be a binary nature, and if they do not account for social, political, cultural, economic, and personal contingencies that can change. As such, we are not universal and unalterable essences, but rather subjectivities which are constantly in flux. It thus follows that masculinity (and femininity) are also a corresponding set of constantly

changing meanings, which are constructed through relationships with ourselves, with others, and with our world. In every social context, there is a friction between what is socially expected (and accepted) behaviour across gender, and what we actually experience. We might conform to social expectations; we might challenge them; and sometimes, we might affirm or reject them without possessing the explicit knowledge of doing so. In short, gender expression in any social field is messy, contradictory, and constantly prone to change. Perhaps a more useful way of studying masculinity is to study the multiple embodiments of being male referring to the behaviours, emotions, gestures, practices that are typically assigned to the body.[4]

It is difficult to pinpoint what exactly masculinity is, if we move away from conventional definitions. However, not being able to get a grip on this, makes it all the more necessary to discuss the phenomena, as it draws our attention to aspects of gender that often remain concealed. In the following chapter, we look more closely at ourselves - the situations that made us aware of our gender, the cost of non-conformity, and the way in which the masculinity and femininity within us forms and re-forms across the seasons of our lives.

Childhood is marked by age

In one of the research workshops with the ethnographers, we asked them to reflect on the first time they became conscious of their gender. The responses revealed the ways in which gender begins to take hold on the body, behaviour and self-expression, from childhood.

For example, Ramesh, who grew up in Madhya Pradesh, shares: *When we were growing up, all of us boys and girls used to play together. In fact, I only realised I was a boy when I went to school. In school, the teachers made us sit separately. Gradually, the girls were given a separate playing area. Us boys, we could roam around after school, but the girls had to go home.*

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4. Here, we also draw from Judith Butler's seminal suggestion in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990) that gender is not essential to the self but is constituted through a series of norms and performative gestures that need to be repeatedly acted. For Butler, gender is "a stylized repetition of acts . . . which are internally discontinuous . . . [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief." Masculinity thus becomes a set of acts that men are expected to perform in certain ways, and refers to an embodied process of becoming. Yet, this process never becomes complete and remains internally 'discontinuous'. And as our research goes on to show, it is precisely this failure that leads to different kinds of negotiations and resistances.

Then I realised that a big difference between boys and girls was freedom. I remember I could tell my mother that I am going to my friend's house to play and that was enough of an explanation. I realised it was not the same for girls. Around class 5, I began to get attracted to girls in my school. Most of the students lived in the same area; a group of boys would go around the house of a girl we liked in school and stare at the girl deliberately. But girls had no such opportunity, they could never roam around freely in our area or stare at boys, for that matter.

Ramesh's awareness of gender comes through the act of separation/ segregation in space – sitting separately in the classroom, a separate playing area for the girls and so on. Gradually, he grows aware of the moral context within which this segregation is taking place - that boys are afforded mobility, freedom to express their attraction, whereas girls are not. Ramesh's recognition of himself as a boy, comes from the awareness of his differences with girls. Here, we see how identification as a process occurs not by realising who you are, but rather, from realising who you are not. This links back to how masculinity itself is conceptualised as an opposition or a separation from femininity.

Let's take another example, from Vinod who shares: *In childhood, I think all mothers enjoy dressing up their sons. Except in my case, I never stopped enjoying dressing up, I continued. I used to love wearing all kinds of clothes. My aunts and grandmother grew very worried about*

this tendency. I was repeatedly told that this is not good behaviour. I was never a sportsperson; I hated the outdoors. I liked to play house-house; I would spend hours in the kitchen. I was very introverted. My grandmother, in particular, was very worried, she would try to get my elder cousin to 'correct' me, by introducing me to what boys should do. He was 6-7 years older than me. He was fond of me and also loved to dress up in female clothes. He was everyone's favourite in the family, so he would also behave the way he was expected to. He would let me play my indoor games, but he also wanted me to play cricket. Like any other kid my age, I also wanted friends. I wanted to have fun and this meant doing the things that other children were doing. So, I guess after a while, playing cricket won. I would still love to cross-dress, though I am shy about it.

Vinod's reflections carry the confusion and curiosity that often shapes our childhood. Similar to Raghu above, there is a particular age till which it is permissible to be fluid in your gender expression (this entails, in Vinod's case, his mother's pleasure at dressing him up). But after a certain age, you are expected to behave in accordance with the gender assigned to you — so, Vinod's desire to spend long hours in the kitchen and his aversion to sports causes alarm in the family, as these behaviours are not what is conventionally expected of boys his age.

We also see space being demarcated as inherently gendered. In the recollection of these events, the public and the private (and the corresponding masculine/feminine) are being reaffirmed in terms of where the boys should be (outdoors) and where they should not (the kitchen). It is interesting to note that Vinod's behaviour is also of concern to the women in the family. Given that women are often the primary agents of socialisation because of the elevated status of motherhood she has to bear in our society, they remain to be actors who have to bear the burden of social morality inside and outside the household. She is not just tasked with managing the domestic space, but she is also responsible for social performance and upholding moral values and traditions that conform to societal norms.

But a woman's authority doesn't seem to extend to conveying the proper methods of masculinity. So, when Vinod's behaviour required correction, the natural authority or experiences of men was evoked – and it was these young men – who were potentially trying to understand their own subjectivities who had to be role models of power, discipline, and a particular or the 'correct' form of maleness. The cost of not conforming to this script is evident in the last lines of Vinod's excerpt - a sense of alienation, not fitting in, feeling alone – a feeling that potentially outlasts the childhood memory.

While Vinod reaches an uncomfortable compromise, *'I wanted to have fun and this meant doing things other children were doing'*. Suresh's experiences led him down a different path. He says: *In my childhood, I would try to be myself in my family. I was assigned female gender at birth, but in fact, I knew I was a boy. But it didn't end there. In many homes, there are different kinds of masculinity that get expressed and make a huge difference to the power within the family. In my family, it used to manifest in a manner that would lead to many questions in my mind. Most of the time, I would question the gender regulations imposed on me by my family and relatives. For example, they would restrict me from climbing a tree saying, 'Aren't you a girl? Why do you climb trees?' It was a constant reminder that I am female. But I never gave these comments that much importance. I would question back saying, 'If I can't climb a tree, that is different, but when I can, why bring gender into it?' They never had answers to my questions and I would continue doing things my own way. Each reminder of gender restrictions irritated me and I would get angry. I also did not have close friends to share my thoughts with. The reason for not having friends is obviously my choice of gender, which made me behave differently from girls around me.*

Suresh's questions strike at the heart of the way in which gender enfolds all aspects of experience, within the largely patriarchal contexts we inhabit in this country. Through gendered behaviour which is marked either masculine or feminine – climbing trees, spending time in the kitchen – we see the manner in which discipline and punishment are encoded into gendered expectations and behaviours right from childhood. Through a strict separation of space and activity, we begin to realise the possibilities and limits of the gender identities that are assigned to us.

In the three examples above, we can clearly see the functioning of gender regulations in the division of space (classrooms, playgrounds, kitchen etc.), in the expected behaviour (staying indoors versus loitering around freely), the way in which these regulations are enforced (the school system, older relatives in the family), and the kinds of compromise/negotiations that begin at an early age (not fitting in friends groups, censure from the family and so on). Read together, these three memories of people's lives reveal the ways in which gender begins to be assigned to the male-ness or female-ness of a particular body. From the examples above, we can clearly see masculinity as a performance that is required to be perceived as a man, effected through practices (playing cricket), behaviours or gestures (mobility, staring at girls) through which we 'perform' our gender.

Returning to Suresh, he goes on to say: *I have known many female-assigned community people who shared with me their perceptions of the journey of 'I wanted to be man' to 'I am a man'. In fact, we would chat*

about how the process of gendering started at home which would often clash with the idea of being a man inside of us.

We enjoyed this secretly, but also expressed ourselves in different ways. For me, it was the game of cricket. I started playing cricket with boys in the neighbourhood streets. I would now say that the act of playing cricket was the first assertion of my masculinity. Usually, it is a 'male bastion sport' according to society. 'Cricket' became a way to assert masculinity. My first assertions of masculinity manifested in 'working and taking roles of work' outside the four walls of home and never engaging in the kitchen. During those times, the gender binary of feminine and masculine was, in my head, based on social morality.

It is interesting to read Vinod and Suresh's reflections as mirror opposites. Vinod, having been born a boy, is reluctant to participate in the masculine behaviours expected of him. He prefers to spend time indoors, cooking, and wearing feminine clothes. In contrast, Suresh, who was female assigned by birth, realises at a young age that he identifies with being a boy. To embody masculinity, he begins to participate in behaviours that are permissible only to the male body, namely, playing cricket, climbing trees, avoiding the kitchen, and so on. Reading both examples together, it is possible to sense the friction or the division between masculinity and femininity that is clearly drawn, but also correspondingly, the tensions between what is assigned and what is felt. So, while there might be a moralistic framework on the idea of being man and women, people's experiences of being a man and being a woman is ripe with confusion, shyness, and anger (Raghu, Vinod, and Suresh), and these appear to feature in the memories of one's childhood. The struggles between personal experiences and social expectations of masculine and feminine is most poignantly captured by Suresh's description of the clash between the social expectations of being a man and the *man inside us.*

Childhood is also a passage of time where one is still in the process of becoming and more open to exploring in and around social moralities. Raghu shares a memory: *In school, as boys, we would often enact rape scenes from Kannada films. I would also take part. Even though I would object to it, I never thought it was exceptional or bad. Though once I remember, punching a friend when he kissed me on the cheek. Our exploration of ourselves was often through imitation (what we saw with our elders), but we were exploring outside the gender boundary. Because in the films, it is the woman who is raped, whereas here, the rape is on the male body. I remember in the hostel once, two boys were sleeping on the same bed, and the entire class beat them up, saying that this was wrong. I don't know if they (the two boys) were doing this because there was no female body around or because they were curious about each other.*

Raghu's notes bring back memories of a 'natural sexual curiosity' that exists in childhood. Before the morality and censure of adulthood sets in, there is an exploration of what would be sexual or where sexuality might reside. In the context where Raghu is growing up, knowledge of physical intimacy is gleaned from popular culture, particularly rape scenes in Kannada films. It is interesting to observe the different registers of desire operating in these sets of notes.

Popular culture films often depict an unbridled male sexual desire and violence as one of the legitimate ways in which desire/intimacy of men gets expressed. This unbridled male passion, not always understood as violence, serves as titillation for male audiences.

Some media scholars have argued, because cinema becomes a way for audiences to satiate desires that they are too afraid to act on in real life[5], there is also the possibility that these images set the terms and imagination of what male desire should be. In overlaying male desire with male violence, mostly directed at the female body; the exploration of one's own sexuality is set against the violent inequality between men and women. This often reinforces the objectification of women's bodies and the invisibilisation of women's own sexuality or desires. 'Masculinity', in these cinematic moments, is performed through the medium of aggression, non-consent, violence, and domination.

Returning to Raghu's own recollections, the way desire is expressed is through violation, albeit on male bodies, and the imagination reconstructs the connection between intimacy and violence. Yet, they are very aware of social scripts that forbid the expression of these intimacies, violence, and desire towards the male body. Despite their desire for sexual exploration, the boys are aware that there is something forbidden/taboo in their actions. As Raghu says, '*in exploring outside the gender boundary*'. His usage of the word 'boundary' is very revealing, especially when we realise how early these taboos start to appear in people's lives, in Vinod's and Suresh's, and not Raghu's life. This boundary is not, however, merely in the imagination; it is actively enforced as was evident in Raghu's example, by his classmates, who form a mob and beat up two boys who are merely sleeping next to each other. Raghu's notes reveal the ways in which gender boundaries take on a particular normative and moralistic tone, wherein desire expressed between two male bodies (even in the simple act of sleeping next to each other) is forbidden, whereas male violence against the female body as an expression of desire is permissible and validated. Heterosexuality as a foundational framework for a specific form of masculine desire, therefore, becomes very clear to all who

5. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Laura Mulvey

perform masculinity. In short, these narratives are highly illustrative of the kinds of 'masculinity' that is allowed, perhaps even celebrated (men raping women) and the kind of masculinity that is forbidden (sexual desire between men). In heteronormative structures, to become men entails a repression of non-heteronormative desires and pleasures. It necessitates performing dominance as the only expression of pleasure.

From the excerpts above, we also witness how various sites (family/school) begin to script a performance of masculinity and femininity from a young age. We also sense different emotional responses to this scripting, like Vinod's reluctance, Raghu's uneasy participation, Suresh's refusal to participate in gender codes.

And then there is Dhananjay, who shares: *When I got responsibility at home, I realised I am a boy. At that time, I felt uncomfortable about it. But now at this stage of my life, I am comfortable being uncomfortable. Because after seeing a lot of pain and suffering in my life, I felt that if I want to escape suffering - that hope itself increases my suffering. You can't have a life without suffering. The most beautiful and unique thing about being a man is you are actually born without values and society lets you live that. Society only values you according to how useful you are to society. This realisation is painful. But you can use that pain as a fuel, and become the best version of you or you can suffer through that pain. But I am comfortable being uncomfortable now. Sometimes as a man, you have to do things that are necessary no matter how you feel about them. It's better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.*

Dhananjay's reflections reveal a canvas of emotions that are pertinent in recognising the shifting pressures of upholding a particular kind of masculinity: Utility, responsibility, pain, suffering, and acceptance of discomfort. If Raghu and Vinod become aware of their gender through separation, through discipline and punishment, Dhananjay's recognition comes with an awareness of responsibility. Most striking is Dhananjay's statement that *'man is born without values and society accords value based on how useful one is',* which underlies one of the dominant expectations of masculinity: To be a provider, breadwinner, and to prove one's utility. He also speaks of endurance, another typical feature of masculinity, where men are expected to bottle up their pain and not reveal their vulnerabilities and fears. Dhananjay's reflections make us sense the difficulty in continually fighting against systems that are larger than us, '*to escape suffering increases suffering'*. And he chooses (not without a sense of pathos) instead to find ways in which to accept where he has been placed, '*better to be a warrior in a garden, than a gardener in a war'*. His choice of metaphor is evocative as he uses the contrast between war

(death, destruction) with a garden that holds the hope of growth. Equally, it is true that his sense of growth is marked by psychic destruction caused by the pain of becoming a man. The running thread across his reflections signal a lack of choice beyond a certain point.

Indeed, as gendered expectations are internalised, there is a need to negotiate with norms in everyday life, making 'choice' complex, compromised, and messy. In order to explore these expectations better, we delve deeper into the systems which reward certain ideals of masculinity in the next section.

The pressures of 'becoming'

As we saw from Dhananjay's account, the process of 'becoming' is not free and exploratory: it turns into one of imposition and pressure. Expectations of 'masculine' and 'feminine' grow more rigid, and the cost of violating these codes becomes more severe. This pressure is often uncomfortable and restrictive. One of the key sites through which these restrictions start to weigh very heavily is within the family. Raghu remembers growing up in a family where from a young age, he was forced to take on the role of the 'son' of the house: *I have always known that my grandfather is more affectionate toward my sister. But still, within the hierarchy of the home, I am given preference, just because I am a boy. Growing up, my sister would cry if I got something first, and I would cry if she got something before me. But the difference was that even though she was older, she would always be told to sacrifice things for me. I was never told to sacrifice anything for her. Around when I turned 23-24 years old, my parents started asking for my opinion on matters of the house, even though my sister is older than me, is married, and has more experience. I used to keep telling my parents, 'I actually don't know much about all this, why don't you ask my sister?' But they would ignore me saying, 'you are the man of the house, you have to take the decision.'*

This excerpt reveals the way in which gendered expectations work in the space of the familial and the domestic. In spite of his youth and inexperience, family-related decisions are deferred to Raghu because he inhabits a male body. He is expected to show authority, make decisions, and take up the mantle of the son of the house, simply because he is a man. We can sense Raghu's own questioning of his abilities to take on the mantle, and his diffidence towards the position he is supposed to occupy. Simultaneously, we can see how the values being in Raghu about what are expected for women, including his sister's acceptance of a 'lower' position in the household hierarchy, lack of decision making, sacrifice, not

being taken seriously despite experience etc. that is, an embodiment of 'femininity'. We see the deliberate socialisation of gender roles within the family that do not align with feelings of affection or love, as is evident in Raghu's narrative where he clearly articulates that despite Raghu's grandfather being fond of his sister, preference is given to Raghu, as the son of the house.

As we started to explore the narratives of the ethnographers, we found that these tactics of socialisation were varied. One such tactic is taunts/ridicule as was articulated in an experience shared by Ramesh: *The night I got married, my wife and I were given a room of our own in my house. All the children from my neighbourhood were laughing and whispering. It felt like everyone knew what was going on, except for me. When I found out I had to sleep in the same room as my wife, I felt strange, and I didn't go into the room the entire night. I was embarrassed about what my family would think. We had just gotten married, and already we were staying together in the same room. So, I spent the night separately. Next day, when my brother returned home from work, he asked, 'Aren't you a man? Why didn't you sleep with your wife?' I didn't know how to answer my big brother. I didn't understand his question, so I kept quiet. Four years later, when my daughter was born, I finally understood what he meant. I guess that's when I became a man.*

There is something painful about the way in which Ramesh describes his process of '*becoming a man.'* His notes debunk popular stereotypes about masculinity. We already know that a characteristic of male desire is unbridled, unrestricted, and violent (as was evident in the previous paragraphs); yet, in this account, we see Ramesh's hesitation and timidness. Even as concepts of masculinity are drummed into men, especially in the pressures of exhibiting confidence and courage, Ramesh is seemingly hesitant, tentative, and unknowing of these social roles that he has to 'perform', as per people's expectations: '*Everyone knew what was going on except me.'* To him, there appeared to be a collective knowledge and consensual agreement about the *'suhaag raat'* (a colloquial term for the first night a newly wedded couple spends together), which is less about the expression of love and intimacy between the couple, and more about the social expectation of consummating the marriage, ensuring the family lineage continues.

Ramesh's failure to take charge on his wedding night was redeemed (in his own mind) only when he fulfilled another one of societal roles he was expected to perform, that of a father to his daughter. Because of his own caste position, Raghu embodies power through caste , and yet he still has to negotiate with 'masculine' expectations, in order to avoid the ridicule from his family. Perhaps, his masculinity is embedded in the structural

logic of caste pride and sexual virility. But rather than fulfilment, Ramesh's story emphasises the internal struggle between self-expression and navigating the morals of social norms.

This struggle for self-expression is not always an easy battle and what is left unrealised within ourselves, often results in a displacement onto someone else. A clear example of this is the story of Rohan who shares: *I come from a family with big money. A rich, upper caste family from Uttar Pradesh. I think in our caste, there is a lot of value placed on hard labour, like even though you've made a lot of money, you have to keep working. It's never enough. That's how my father is. My mother, on the other hand, came from Bangalore to Uttar Pradesh. As soon as she got married, she wasn't allowed to wear jeans, dress the way she wanted. She had to wear sarees. One day, she took the car out by herself and my grandfather got so angry, he insisted she touch everyone's feet in the house as an apology. So, every day was a lesson in misogyny and patriarchy. Even if we go out somewhere, like say abroad, and my mother wants to wear a dress, my father will tell her to wear pants under the dress, because it looks too 'western'. As the only son in the family, I am, of course, expected to perform a certain kind of masculinity, which I cannot. I haven't come out openly to my parents yet, but I remember one day when I returned home wearing kajal (kohl), my mother cried and said, I looked disgusting. I got so angry and I told her, 'Sometimes you also look disgusting but I don't ask you to change, do I?' There are all these tensions and frictions between us, but in front of the relatives, everyone tries to act nice. Even though we are all aware of the violence(s) between all of us.*

Rohan's perspective traces the manner in which gender norms are shaped by caste/class contexts. In his father's family, in spite of generational wealth, there is an emphasis on hard labour, a work ethic that shapes paternal masculinity. There is a jarring contrast when Rohan's mother enters the family, because she comes from a cultural context that has relatively given her more freedom. There is a re-negotiation of her femininity, from a single to a married woman, which takes place visibly, in her appearance, in the curtailment of her mobility, even as she might defy it. We see how Rohan's father, in his position as the patriarch of the house, pushes his mother to conform to his family's values, in gestures such as forcing her to touch the feet of elders. A deliberate setting up of a false dichotomy between the West and tradition allows him to signal his displeasure and the socially acceptable ways of being. In North India, this push towards tradition would be referred to in certain caste/class contexts as being 'Sanskaari'. Sanskaari loosely translates to manners and behaviour that is in line with traditional cultural norms.

It is a potent term, because it conceals the casteist/classist expectations that are usually used to police a woman's behaviour/sexuality. In the case of Rohan's mother, her position as the daughter-in-law of the house means she must conform to what is expected of her by society and by tradition, just as Ramesh is expected to perform the role of the newly wedded man in the example above.

The family dynamics become more complicated when we try to understand Rohan's mother's censure towards him. Having been denied the freedom to dress the way she wants to, is she displacing the same frustration onto Rohan? Is it fear that Rohan will not find a place within the family if he fails to perform the masculinity expected of him? Faced by Rohan's resistance to the masculinity expected of him, his mother reinforces a normative and a Sanskaari masculinity when she tries to discipline and punish him for moving out of the fold.

Similar to what we observed in Ramesh's writings above, we sense the weight of social expectations weighing down both actors (*but in front of the relatives everyone tries to behave well)* even though everyone is not in agreement with these expectations.

This distance between what is felt and what is reinforced is key to understanding how masculinity operates. It draws attention to the *performative* nature of masculinity[6], as a set of behaviours, practices and gestures, only some of which are validated or seen as a norm. At the same time, it also provides a signalling into the nature of femininities and masculinities, present within us, which are flattened systematically by those close to us, by circumstances, and by our powerful need to be accepted. This understanding once again, unsettles the notion of masculinity as a universal and static phenomenon, opening it up to ideas of everyday negotiation, resistance, and change.

But what would resistance or change look like?

In describing his relationship with his current partner, Suresh shares: *The point is to not reproduce the same system of family, keeping feminine gendered people under control, being the husband who can beat up their wives if the wives do 'wrong', screaming and shouting down at people, especially their partners etc. In our life together, we have chosen to challenge this. Both of us [Suresh and his partner] have had different kinds of non-sexual relationships which go beyond traditional roles. Sometimes, my partner calls me 'amma' as a child and I sometimes do the same. One day in our group meeting a trans man was trying to correct us, saying we should call each other 'appa' as we are trans men, and not*

6. This is elaborated on in the chapter on Rituals and Tradition.

'amma.' Why should mothering or care taking be limited to the female body? It is also about a certain expression and a way of emotional being.

Suresh's experience stands in contrast to the pressures described by both Ramesh and Rohan above, because of the explicit choices that he makes in rejecting the normative expectations of masculinity. He and his partner have chosen to make a family that does not cater to the usual gendered hierarchy, and by that stance, is openly in defiance of it. Suresh's notes indicate that this restructuring and reimagination of families and relationships can only be made possible through the elaborate and explicit recognition of these power structures.

The other significant departure is the way in which Suresh and his partner attempt to disassociate emotions/behaviour from the clutches of gender. To resist the 'stickiness' of masculinity, Suresh and his partner, both of whom are trans-men, are choosing to script a different kind of masculinity, which challenges the dominant ideal of both masculinity *and* femininity, both within cis-heteronormative structures and dominant logics of transness. In framing their dialogic conversation against gender-typed language, and consequently, gender roles (amma vs. appa), they are able to articulate the deliberate mechanisms by which we have to find ways of perhaps fighting emotions, behaviours, and language that are assigned and expected of our bodies. This defiance allows us to see the manner in which notions of masculinity are elaborately constructed, as was evident in the push on Ramesh to perform his sexual virility and prowess, despite his shyness and hesitation.

In the excerpts above we see how exploration, curiosity, freedom has to contend with restrictions, moralities, and discipline. We see how school, peer groups, families, and communities become sites for ensuring conformity to an imagined masculine ideal. In each instance, there is a friction between a hidden, experienced masculinity/femininity and a socially expected and acceptable expression. In highlighting this friction, we hope to draw attention to the performative nature of masculinity.

Masculine-feminine

One of the primary questions we had to tussle with during the writing of this research study was whether masculinity is only exhibited by men, and femininity by women. Following this, is masculinity a catch-all phrase for violence/domination, and is nurturing/caring the domain of the feminine? In which case, if a woman behaves in a way that is aggressive/dominating/violent, does it mean she is embodying what is popularly referred to as toxic masculinity?

Friends advised us to not create yet another binary between masculinity and femininity. Others urged us to consider the binary: What purpose does it serve? Does the binary mark the extremes between which the realms of masculine feminine float? Does it allow us to study the interplay between masculinity and femininity and how we inhabit it, and how it shifts across the different identities we embody?

In the following section, we attempt to tease out the unstable, shifting relationship between masculinity and femininity, as experiences that shape all of us, irrespective of gender.

As mentioned above, our effort has been to disassociate masculinity *solely* from the bodies of men. In our research process, we asked the ethnographers to reflect on where they perceive masculinity inside and around themselves. The responses revealed a promising friction with regard to how masculinity and femininity flows inside each of us.

Ruby shares: *Gender roles are fixed by society. For example, I am a girl. I perfectly fit into the society's framework of a girl. I am beautiful and have fair skin. I am independent; I live with my parents. Sometimes, I feel good about fitting perfectly into my gender role. I am happy I can meet my family's expectations. But sometimes I feel the restriction. I can't ride*

a scooter. My parents make the decisions about my marriage, I can't choose my own partner. I feel helpless.

Even my desires are governed as per society. At these times, I don't want to fit into the bracket of my gender role, and I wish I was not a girl.

Ruby's reflections reveal how we simultaneously benefit and are restricted by gender norms. As she says, there are times when she enjoys performing the femininity expected of her. It is worth noting that the markers of femininity here are all based on appearance — her beauty and fair skin. This brings to mind a popular saying in some parts of North India, '*A woman is meant to be seen, not heard.*' Socialisation works on the principle of rewarding behaviour in sync with the norm, and punishing that which doesn't. For example, restrictions on Ruby's mobility or her lack of decision making within the family. These are the specific articulated expectations of femininity that require women to be attractive, obedient, and domesticated. When Ruby says, *'even my desires are governed by society'*, it is a powerful reminder of how deeply and visibly we can sense the weight of social expectations on us.

The cost of transgressing these expectations for women is often met with the same censoring and discipline as we saw in the excerpts shared by Vinod, Raghu, and Ramesh above.

Rachel shares: *My elder brother had a big issue with me when I was growing up about how I do not sit like a girl or behave like a girl. How I shouldn't touch the TV - which was new at the time, or the music system, because being a girl, I would end up spoiling the gadgets. I was constantly told to sit properly because I would sit with my legs apart, and that wasn't considered ladylike. And it wasn't just my brother, my mother treated me the same way. She would give me the bony parts of the chicken and give my brothers the juicy, fleshy portions. When my mother bought apples, I was told to leave the newly bought fresh apples for my brother and my father, and eat the old apples. When I was older, I decided that if I was not good enough to eat what my brothers ate, I wouldn't eat at all. I remember that I stopped eating apples until I was pregnant. This behaviour continued with my mother-in-law, who would belittle me in front of the whole family for wanting to hire a cook, because she wanted her son to have fresh food straight from my hands. My job as a social worker was demeaned as a waste of time and energy, instead, I could have been a 'better' mother. Because I treated the domestic workers and drivers well, and did social work, I was called a 'communist', who earned 'chicken shit' while my husband was the capitalist who was working hard to ensure money for the family. When my daughter was born, I was told that all my money had been put into schemes that I couldn't access - and when I argued back, my husband told me I should be grateful for his*

wisdom in putting my savings into schemes. It has been several years since he passed away, and till date I cannot access the money because he didn't leave it to me in his will, and being in his name, I can't access it.

In Rachel's experience, we see the binary between masculinity and femininity constructed through the woman's body. As a child, Rachel's body language (*sitting with legs apart)* is not befitting for a young girl. In her mother's preferential treatment toward her brother, we can sense the validation of boy's bodies, requirements and needs over the girl's. In many parts of our country, the girl is considered *'Parayi' (*outsider) because she is expected to marry and become part of another family. The men, thus, are valued as the heirs of the family lineage. Across our fieldwork in various social contexts in this country, and as has been documented systematically in any study of malnutrition, girls are undernourished not because of poverty, but because of the gendered division of food.

We have personally observed and heard stories about the manner in which girls, because of the practice of eating last, subsist for days on leftovers, whereas the more nutritious food is given to the men in the house. Often, this nourishment is provided to men, in the guise of their 'heavy workload', and yet, we know that even when women do hard labour in the fields or elsewhere, their labour is devalued, as is evident in the excerpt above. Rachel's work was not 'real work' and was seen as less 'useful' than her husband's, even though both provided for the family. These social expectations that men's work is real and women's work is not, also have a corollary: Men who do not work are not seen as men. Given that men's primary responsibility is to provide for the family and women's primary responsibility is to care for the family, when a working woman is taunted for her neglect of her social role, an unemployed man is likely to be seen in the same manner as not having fulfilled a primary gender role. In this context, should we view the taunting as the same? If it is not the same, how then do we view Rachel's behaviour? Is it easier for her to defy social norms in sitting with legs apart, choosing to earn, speaking back to power?

In some ways, the question we are asking is: What does masculinity feel or look like when inhabited by the female body? What are the notions of 'masculinity' that we seek to reject and seek to embrace when it is housed within female bodies?

To understand this a little better, we turn to Neelam, whose account provides contrasting notions of masculinity and femininity. Neelam, who grew up in a small town in Uttar Pradesh, shares: *I have no brother, only sisters and because of this our family has faced a lot of masculinity. For example, we can never host the festival of raksha bandhan because I don't have a brother. We were always asked, who will we tie the rakhi to?*

My sister and I never got new clothes during rakhi. Everyone would say, what will you do with new clothes? I remember we often cried during rakhi because we didn't have a brother. In my family, my aunt used to always taunt us, because she had a son, and she said, at the time of our weddings, only he will be able to complete all the rituals as a brother for us. She was always throwing her weight around because she had a male child. This used to bear very heavily on my mother, because she always felt she was an incomplete woman because she couldn't give birth to a male child. When I was 13 years old, she passed away. I always felt she was under tremendous social pressure because it was considered necessary for her to give birth to a male child. She was always reminded of this, like my elder aunt would say, you better not fight too much,

because during your daughter's wedding, it will be my son you will put her in the car for her 'Vidai' (a ritual). She is referring to a tradition in our area where during the wedding, the brother picks up the sister in his lap and puts her in the car. My mother, even as she was dying, told us that no matter what happens, don't let that boy be part of this ritual at your wedding. I feel the way my aunt behaved with my mother is a strong display of masculinity. In our village, women have no right to property. The property will pass onto the next male member, even if the women in the family are older. Even the jewellery a woman is wearing on her wedding day, doesn't belong to her. We have a saying that women cannot inherit property, because they themselves are considered property!

The pressure on Neelam's mother for not being able to give birth to a male child, is perhaps one of the most common ways in which patriarchy exerts itself on the bodies of women. This instrumental quality of women's bodies is emphasised by Neelam when she says, '*Women cannot inherit property because they themselves are considered property!*'

What Neelam describes is a family/community context where women lack decision-making power and agency, from their wedding jewellery to their own bodies. The pressure leaves her mother feeling like an '*incomplete woman*', which signifies just how deeply social norms can encircle and choke our own notions of self-worth. Here, the social norms are embodied by Neelam's aunt who taunts/derides her mother for this apparent lack.

Do we perceive that Neelam's aunt could be using specific power bestowed upon her through her male progeny, in the manner that it was intended? Could she be bolstering her own position even though it appears to be precarious? Could she be reaffirming her position as a way to solidify consensus around this particular patriarchal norm? How do emotions of pettiness, jealousy, gossiping be categorised, as masculine or feminine? Given Neelam describes these very emotions as masculine impositions – is she reading 'power' in her aunt's actions? Can aggression be considered as 'masculine'? If so, why? Is the patriarchal validation of being a 'good' mother only when one has given birth to a male child, the only 'masculine' nature reflected in this story? Perhaps masculinity also resides in the hierarchical order of the family/community, where power continues to be derived from a relationship to a male body.

Neelam continues: *I wanted to study journalism, but had no money to pursue my education. I was worried about how to arrange the fee for my course. I asked my grandmother who had always supported me. My grandmother took out the family jewellery that she had saved for her old age. I knew my grandmother had saved these jewels because she felt that her children and grandchildren would only take care of her if she*

had something she could give them in return. She felt most of the family was motivated by this greed. But, in spite of this, she gave it to me saying I should use it for my education. She told me not to tell anyone in the family, as it would lead to conflict, as other people might also want to lay claim to the jewellery. I was really taken aback by my grandmother's support. At the time that she made this sacrifice for me, it was unheard of for family jewellery to be pawned off for a girl's education. During this time, I could not ask any male members in my family for money. I felt they would not be able to see any importance in my education. My grandmother felt that one out of the three of us sisters had to study, so that I could take care of the other two, and ensure they got married respectably. Even though my mother received a lot of taunts from my aunts for not giving birth to a male child, my grandmother never put any pressure on her. Instead, my grandmother saw leadership qualities in me, and felt I could take on the responsibility of the house. Looking back, perhaps it was my grandmother who displayed more masculinity. My grandfather was a really simple man. My grandmother did a lot of work at home and on the field, much faster than my grandfather. People say she used to go to the field and finish more work than all the men put together. She could even operate a tractor on her own.

My grandmother had some land on my name. But it was transferred to my uncle's son, because he was the only male child in the family. But before my grandmother's death, she transferred the property back to me. This was a first in our village, for a girl to inherit her family's property. When my grandmother passed away, I wanted to participate in her last rites, but my relatives didn't allow me. But at my grandmother's prayer meeting, I spoke about all she had done for me in front of everyone. This was also a first for a girl in our village, because usually only men occupy the space to speak at a prayer meeting. I feel I have inherited my spirit of protest from my grandmother. I hope to stand up for other women, the way my grandmother had stood up for me.

This excerpt from Neelam's writings further complicates these questions of masculinity that we have been asking. While the assertiveness expressed by her aunt is named by Neelam as 'masculine', the same assertiveness and self-confidence by her grandmother is not necessarily seen by her as 'masculine', or at least, it is not referred to directly as 'masculine'. This shift in the conversation about the manner in which her grandmother moved against community norms, the manner in which she is depicted as a brave and forward-looking woman, and in the way that she displayed courage and conviction (in transferring the deeds, in riding a tractor etc.), these are also traits of a strong will and a powerful inclination to dominate one's circumstances, especially in the context of her grandfather, whom she describes as a 'simple man'.

This begs us to ask the question: Can we term these as constituent elements of masculinity? If so, what are these traits in the service of? What are the distinctions that Neelam sees in the performance of these traits – one of whom she clearly names as 'masculine', but the other, where she is less articulate about?

Could it be that in our reading of masculinity, we often reaffirm the normative tropes of masculinity, when we engage with assertiveness, confidence, and speaking out as 'behaving like men'? While Neelam is able to understand her aunt's behaviour as masculine, it is also simultaneously a marker of the conformity to a conventional femininity; in fact, the shaming and naming of women who do not give birth to sons is *precisely* the behaviour expected from women under patriarchy. Similarly, perhaps in the case of Rachel above, and in Neelam's grandmother, we can also potentially read this as a resistance to the femininity expected of them under patriarchy, and so, can also deem to be the presence of 'masculine' traits within a female body (as we have in the previous paragraphs).

So, while Neelam reads her aunt's behaviour as masculine, and her grandmother's as not, it is just as easy to read her aunt's behaviour as traditionally feminine, and her grandmother's as masculine. This understanding, these multiple readings, and our own experiences testifies to the fact that masculinity has multiple, messy meanings. It may suggest domination when perpetrated by men and it can be a site of resistance when performed by women. In the hands of women, it can be used to liberate women from traditionally-bound shackles or it can feed into aggressive and competitive behaviours that blame and shame women. Thus, even when masculinity is removed from binaristic gender identity, it may reaffirm the binary, and does not necessarily promise subversion or resistance *all* the time.

The stickiness of the binary is also reflected in Suresh's reflections on the transmen community: *Again, the contradiction is that we trans masculine people who rebel against our families to assert ourselves, when we fall in love with our cis women partners will unleash the same control of morality against them. When I go to parties with trans men, the conversation is around potency, masculinity, keeping up 'family values', muscle building, working out at the gym, being 'big brother' attitude, showing family head power etc. Another subtle but quite hurtful behaviour is how within the trans masculine community, the pre-surgery trans men are less entertained in post-surgery trans masculine groups for the fear of getting identified as 'not the real man.' In defiance, I have always sought to practise a softer masculinity.*

According to Suresh, then, despite subverting the social script of gender by transitioning into becoming men, there is a 'stickiness' of norms by which conventional expectations of masculinity (family values, potency, muscles etc.) trickle down to the trans-male community. The pressures of masculinity reiterate within trans communities also because of the social demand to pass and to be taken seriously as 'a man'. Suresh's reflections clearly underline how difficult it is to disassociate a performance of masculinity from the bodies of men, trans or cis. Even though masculinity is socially scripted, the pressure to uphold its performance is viscerally felt – *the fear of not getting identified as the 'real' man.*

RW Connell's seminal work[7] proposes a theoretical framework which accounts for hegemonic, marginal, subordinate masculinities. As Connell's own theoretical revisions indicate, the flow of power between these different kinds of masculinity are not unidirectional. For instance, in the excerpt above, Suresh is seen actively resisting/negotiating with a dominant form of masculinity. In response, Suresh chooses to script his

7. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0891243205278639

own masculinity, in his journey of transitioning into being a man. However, while a 'softer masculinity' might be desirable, certain contexts do not allow for this choice. For example, in the case of lowered caste populations, where a certain degree of humiliation and violence marks the everyday, a show of hyper-masculinity might be necessary in order for daily survival. In homophobic environments, it might be difficult for sexual minorities to express themselves freely, as it can entail a great risk, at times, even a threat to life. Or in the case of dominant caste/class communities, not upholding conventional masculinity can run the risk of violence and being outcasted[8]. Thus, any analysis of masculinity needs to take into account the power differentials across contexts and the constituent elements of masculinity that are being constantly reinforced, reified, or rejected.

In the excerpts above, we see an interplay of masculinity and femininity within individuals and communities in both demanding and enabling ways. Within family structures, norms are set and challenged. There is both resistance and compromise. Male bodies experience vulnerability, humiliation, shyness and awkwardness; female bodies exhibit aggression, control, and courage. Male weakness possibly reinscribes masculinity and potentially challenges it. Equally, female strength sometimes reinforces hierarchy, but also at other times resists it.

In conclusion, there is a distance between the identity we are *expected* to perform and *the lived reality of our embodied experiences* (including how we perform, who we choose to be, how we relate to ourselves). Yet, there is no easy way to 'escape' these expectations in a complete or total way and gendered structures are susceptible to reproduction.[9]

For example, Ramesh spoke to us about the discomfort that he had with his own productions of masculinity, when it came to conversations related to his daughter: *When my daughter got admission into a prestigious college in Bhopal, we were all very happy. But I was also afraid, because there were rumours of how the atmosphere in the college enabled ragging. So, my daughter didn't want to live in the college hostel. She said she'd take a room on rent outside the campus. I felt afraid, because I thought the hostel was a safer option. Plus, it was cheaper. But my daughter insisted that she would stay outside, in a rented room. When my relatives found out, they immediately came to my house and started lecturing my daughter. They told her it wasn't safe. Even though I echoed their worry,*

8. The 'cost' of challenging dominant forms of masculinity are explored in subsequent chapters.

9. Here, one can also refer to recent feminist work that challenges an older model of analysing gender that collapses lived experience and social identity. In her book On Violence and On Violence Against Women (2021), for instance, Jacqueline Rose insists on allowing a "potential gap" between "maleness" and "the infinite complexity of the human mind."

I was angry that they thought they could just come over and scream at my daughter. The reason I was afraid was because I remembered how we used to behave during our youth and how we would tease college girls. My only worry is that another man will behave untowardly with the women in my family, as I have behaved with other women in my youth.

The stickiness that Suresh talks about is also reflected in the conversations that Ramesh has, as a father, and as an older man, remembering his youth. The multiple stances that he has to take as a 'man' is quite revelatory. The relatives emerge as a restrictive force on his daughter's mobility. Ramesh, perhaps silently, echoes the same concerns, but finds himself angry because of the relatives' impunity in screaming at *his* daughter, in *his* home. Further, the source of Ramesh's fear is an acknowledgement of his own past. Through this conversation about the concerns that he has for his daughter, we see different masculinities at play – the relatives, restricting the daughter's mobility/morality; Ramesh as a father asserting his right over his own daughter within the space of the home; and, Ramesh as a father worrying about his daughter in a reckoning with his younger self.

Each of these provide us insights into the different ways in which masculinity and femininity as patterns of behaviour are constructed, and thus contingent on different social and political circumstances. Some behaviours are accepted and legitimised, others are disciplined and sidelined, or worse, criminalised. On asking the researchers how they would define dominant masculinity, Suresh says: *'Dominant Masculinity' is all about how the power is invested and assigned to a particular body type and is given supreme authority by this system. Sometimes, I have felt that feudalism, monarchy, fundamentalism, fascism, religious superiority, convenient manifestations of morality, assumption of superior purity of self, blood, lineage, and food etc. are all different expressions of 'masculinity'. Masculinity runs through all these systems as a complimentary package to make everything convenient and comfortable for a particular body.* Suresh draws attention to the relationship between structures and individuals. How does this dominant masculinity gain its power? What does it seek to protect? For whom is it *convenient?* It is to a closer examination of these structures in relation to masculinity, to which we now turn in the chapters ahead.

Upholding Honour and Pride

By Angarika Guha

In one of our conversations with the ethnographers, we had asked them to reflect on the said and unsaid rules of their community, in relation to masculinity and gender norms. Who sets these rules and with what intention? What happens when these rules are challenged? As we listened to each other's responses, we were struck by the number of times the phrase honour or '*Izzat*' kept coming up. The stories that emerged spoke of love that was denied because of caste boundaries, of violence that was justified in the name of religion, of the pressure of participating in traditions that one did not feel any sense of belonging to, or of the courage and determination to find one's own identity outside of what is defined by community. Each story revealed the way in which the rules of community (caste, class, religious communities) influenced individual expressions of masculinity and femininity.

We now turn to a closer examination of community rules, in particular the notion of honour. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, honour is a necessary and loaded concept. Whether it be for the purpose of nation building, caste pride, religious fundamentalism or patriarchal control, we see honour being used as a way of building community, ensuring conformity, and in the case of crossing community boundaries, a justification for violence. In the context of patriarchy, the site of honour is often the woman's body and it becomes the duty of the man to protect

and chastise this honour. But how is honour defined? Or better yet, whose honour is being protected? And what purpose does this protection of the honour serve? In the excerpts below, we see how the concept of honour conceals dominant caste, class, and religious interests. We see how one of the primary ways in which masculinity is constructed is to task men with protecting honour and to punish women who dare to question/ challenge this notion of honour. This is one of the reasons for the high rate of honour killings in India[10], where anyone who dares to violate caste boundaries is murdered, most often by members of their own family and community. In the following excerpts, we try to understand this notion of honour in greater depth, especially in the context of the conversations with masculinity.

10 https://www.outlookindia.com/national/rising-honour-killings-in-india-a-look-at-5-brutal-murders-in-recent-past-news-296381

Honour: A family matter

My father-in-law is tall, almost six feet, and he sports an impressive moustache. He rides a 350 CC Bullet, with a huge petrol tank. When he sits on his bike, I feel like he is a poster for what a real man should look like! Earlier, he used to have a scooter, but this was soon handed over to the women to run errands. 'The scooter does not suit a man,' he would say. In contrast, my moustache is rather ordinary. Inspired by the clean-shaven heroes of Hindi cinema, I have always wanted to shave my moustache. But each time I tried, I faced a lot of backlash from my family. They perceive the lack of a moustache to be a sign of emasculation.

Recently, when a relative passed away, my father-in-law instructed all the men in the family to shave their moustaches and beards as per our tradition. When my moustache grew back a few days later, I was quick to shave it again. Shortly after, I went to a family gathering. The minute I entered, I could feel everyone's gaze on me. A few of the men stopped me to ask why I had shaved my moustache? I said, 'Just like that'. But they persisted, until I was forced to remain silent. One of the older relatives said, 'Our moustache is our pride. Don't shave it.' 'What does a moustache have to do with community pride?' I asked. 'Why do you ask so many questions? Will you start clapping now at festivals? Start wearing a sari?' This experience really traumatised me. Years later, I read about the murder of a Dalit man because he dared to grow his moustache. After this, I began observing how caste is revealed through physical appearance. Like in cinema, the actors/actresses who are chosen to play upper caste roles, are fair, and tall. The 'Thakur' is always played by the tall, strong, fair man. Likewise, other caste groups are played by actors who are darker, smaller and shorter.

A moustache, a bullet bike, a beard. Ramesh's excerpt almost reads like the beginning of a play, where the stage is set for the entry of *a real man.* Ramesh's father-in-law evokes the stereotypical image of a man, and by extension, an idealised or dominant masculinity. In this story, we see the manner in which everyday objects are gendered – the scooter is fit for women and for 'humble tasks', hardly befitting a man who is almost six feet with an impressive moustache! Facial hair – in the form of a beard or moustache – is such a marker of community, that one can signal being a particular kind of a man, just by making those decisions related to this appearance. So potent are these symbols and signals of masculinity and community pride, that they spark censure, derision, shame, rebellion and pride within Ramesh as well as his community. These are not merely aesthetic choices, but are real boundaries that mark the difference between gender and within gender. As Ramesh says, the distinctions of

the upper and the lowered castes are not that invisible. They are marked by these clear boundaries which carry a social and moral value.

These social classifications allow us to enter the diversity within the male body. For example, in colonial classifications, we find derogatory connotations of how being dark and short carries the connotation of backwardness, whereas fair, strong, and tall signify a superior race. This hierarchy based on physical appearance conceals far more grim and violent subtexts. It is linked to the kind of labour done by different castes where lowered castes are forced to do physical labour while dominant castes become priests, kings, warriors, and so on. The labour performed by different castes also become markers of their social and moral worth, where certain kinds of work assume a higher value while others are denied dignity of labour. This is the violence of the caste system that divides people into categories of 'pure' and 'polluted'. This becomes the reason to maintain strict spatial, social, cultural and ritual boundaries between castes. To transgress these boundaries is perceived as a threat to the so-called honour of the dominant castes.

Ramesh is aware of this, as he mentions reading news of the murder of a Dalit man who grew his moustache[11]. The interlocking of caste and masculinity, therefore, is a very important dimension to explore, especially given the invocation of the gender binary in reducing the man to the status of a (gasp!) woman. Because Ramesh does not behave in the manner that his community approves of, the taunts of, '*Will you wear a sari?',* therefore, reduce him to defending himself against the charge of not being a man, which automatically demotes him to being *like a woman*. These signals differ based on cultural context. For example, keeping a beard is discouraged because of the associations with religious minorities.

Another ethnographer, on reading Ramesh's notes, shared that in her family (dominant caste Hindus from UP), keeping a beard is considered being 'dirty or unkempt'. Irrespective, these aesthetic choices fundamentally create 'codes' of belonging or exclusion. Failure to adhere to these codes results in becoming an outcast.

We return to Suresh's comment in the opening chapter, where he defines 'dominant' masculinity as a system that makes everything convenient for a particular kind of body. In Ramesh's notes, we get a sense of who this dominant body might be. In conversation with a facilitator who works closely on issues of gender and sexuality, we realised just how deeply and intimately caste can shape our expressions of masculinity/

11. https://article-14.com/post/killed-for-sporting-a-moustache-dalits-in-rajasthan-s-feudal-villages-face-rising-tide-of-caste-violence-624cf9afb65f5

femininity. He shared: *Sexuality is connected to caste. I heard someone say recently that if a Rajput boy is gay, he must only be on top during sexual intercourse, not at the bottom. In a focus group discussion with queer men, we also heard somebody say that wearing bangles is okay but they can't wear make-up because of their caste location. Their body image, performance pressure, all of it is related to caste.* This experience reveals the way in which caste seeps into the most intimate of relationships, and even to the most progressive of spaces.

The assigning of meaning to 'make-up' or 'being on top' in the context of caste provides a lens into the manner in which masculinity cannot be divorced from the specific caste contexts in which it emerges. This meaning making, located in non-heterosexual settings, provides insights into the lens deployed to tackle masculinity. While we might constantly focus on the external gaze, the family acting as a source of pressure, there are also insider gazes that also can censor and shape individual expressions.

Ramesh's notes above give us a glimpse into how masculinity starts to create scripts around honour and inscribe them onto our bodies. Responses from the ethnographers also reveal how notions of honour control the boundaries of relationships.

For example, Neelam shared a recent memory from Uttar Pradesh: *My aunt called me this morning and said our neighbor Priyanka had committed suicide at nine in the morning. Priyanka was a very beautiful and cheerful 18-year old girl and we were good friends. My aunt said nobody knows why she hung herself, but her friend suspects it is because she had been continuously speaking on the phone to a boy from another caste, and her mother found out and had complained to her father. It is possible that out of fear, Priyanka had killed herself. I couldn't understand how to react to this information. I asked my aunt if the police had been informed and she said Priyanka's family did not want the scrutiny of a police case. The family was preparing to perform her last rites as soon as possible.*

This reminded me of another case in my village four years ago, where a girl from a lowered caste had killed herself because she was having an affair with a dominant caste boy, whose marriage was fixed to someone else. At the time, she was five months pregnant. In that case too, the girl's family did not inform the police, and some neighbours said that the girl was still breathing when the last rites were hurriedly performed. She could have been saved if she had been taken to the doctor, but her family hurriedly cremated her instead to avoid the dishonour that the family would have to face because of her affair. I spent the entire day after my aunt's phone call feeling very disturbed. Whenever such an incident happens with a girl in my village, no one takes any responsibility. They all say it is a 'family matter' and no-one from outside should intervene.

Neelam's writings are a disturbing account of the cost that people have to bear for transgressing the boundaries of caste, and the and the extent to which families will go to maintain those boundaries. In both examples we see how the family is terrified of public scrutiny. Rather than investigate the cause of death, the family is more concerned with keeping the case a secret. While most families keep a close eye on women's sexuality and 'availability', these kinds of control are also put in place because of the high value placed on endogamy, and the manner in which women's bodies are placed in grave danger when endogamy is risked. In fact, retribution against inter-caste marriages shapes the manner in which masculinity and femininity are understood. Both men and women are implicated in the upholding or defying these scripts of caste alongside gender. While women's bodies are often targets, men's bodies are not spared either.

All of this being done in the guise of 'family' matter also means that families take active part in using the notions of masculinity and femininity to control, regulate and confine both male and female bodies within the framework of caste. 'Privacy' has long been used as a measure to move transgressive behaviour out of the public discourse as a way to preserve the 'norm'. In fact, invoking privacy allows us to examine the different ways in which the boundaries of community and family become porous or rigid depending on the context.

Concepts of honour and privacy are also used to stem resistance from within the family, as Sonia's example points out: *When I was 15 years old, my father's brother (chacha) began sexually abusing me. I told my mother immediately. But my parents were scared of bringing it up with him. My chacha was the main earning member in the family. We were partially dependent on his earnings. He had contributed to my sister's wedding. When I told my mother, she told me that these things often happen, and I should learn to let it go. She said if the news got out, it would create a lot of disturbance for the family. It would also tarnish our honour in the village. It was best to keep this within the family. I was so angry. I told her, 'Why don't you give me poison, I'll kill myself, to ensure your honour is protected?' During that time, my chacha would regularly come to the house. We would meet at family gatherings. No one said anything to him. Shortly after, my family decided to get me married as soon as possible. I was married off to a much older man. In spite of my protests, I was not allowed to continue my education. I remember my chacha took all the decisions even at the time of my marriage. Over the years, I have realised that the person who has money is the most powerful. Once I started working, I slowly began to get some distance from my family. I became financially independent. It is important for a woman to see the world outside her house. When my life was confined to the house, I believed*

what people said about losing 'Izzat' (honour). But when I stepped out, I realised how much of what they say is just to control the women. Now frankly, I don't care. I have no fear. I deal with different kinds of men everyday in my work. I stand on my own two feet.

Sonia's family is economically dependent on her uncle and this compromises their ability to resist his behaviour toward Sonia. Even though the reason given by her mother is 'to protect the honour' of the family, one wonders if the real reason is the economic dependence that Sonia's family has on her uncle. If Sonia was to voice her resistance loudly, it would 'create problems for the family'. Honour that is invoked alongside a particular form of masculinity, legitimises, therefore, most actions within the family, giving men the power to behave with impunity whilst simultaneously curtailing the woman's ability to resist. Sonia's statement, '*Only someone who has money is most powerful*' is an indication of how economic vulnerability sometimes can compound this power dynamic which often shapes and impacts responses to violence exerted through narratives and actions of dominant masculinity.

In all three examples above, we see the influence of caste and class on the family structure. Taking on from Ramesh's notes above, we see how honour is expected to be carried out through the bodies of men and women, where the personal is completely overshadowed by the obligations to the public

or society. We also see the way in which caste shapes performances of masculinity and femininity in the lack of autonomy, the expectation from men is to be assertive and for women, to be obedient.

We can start to see glimpses that structures such as the heterosexual family structure, the caste system, class disparity are capable of producing and giving legitimacy to dominant forms of masculinity. This is important because it enables us to move away from describing masculinity as a 'universal category' or a matter of individual choice, to pressures that are created by social structures.

Policing caste boundaries

Most often, as seen in the examples above, claims on honour can only be made when boundaries of caste communities are transgressed. The disregard to the rules and regulations of the caste community are severely punished, as we have seen in Neelam's examples, and what we will see in Vinod's story as well. Vinod grew up in a dominant caste family in North Karnataka. He shares: *All my aunts only have sons. Only one person has a daughter. So out of 11 cousins, only one is a female. So, there is an*

economy that is built around single men in that side of North Karnataka. I don't know if it's female infanticide or something genetic, but the male to female ratio is 10:2. Which means there are no women, and they are all inbred. Now because we are Brahmins, we have to maintain bloodline and purity. So, they want a bride from the same caste for their son. But slowly the women are getting educated and they migrate out of the city. The ones who remain, know their value in the market, and they don't want to get married to the younger men. So there is a huge economy built around finding a bride. Families go to Jharkhand and Bengal and buy brides and bring them back for the men here.

The insistence on maintaining caste purity has set in motion a completely different economy, as Vinod describes. The skewed sex ratio indicates, ominously, a preference for male children, and one reason could be female infanticide, as Vinod himself implies. This is in accordance with social norms that validate the preference for a son in India. As mentioned earlier, it is the son who is considered the true heir of the family, while the daughter is considered to be an outsider, as she will get married and leave for another home. The other reason Vinod speculates, is genetics, a loaded term when used in the relation of maintaining bloodline and purity. In the case of Vinod's family, we sense a similar anxiety of polluting the bloodline in the case of inter-caste marriage, so much so that it is more preferable to identify women from a different geographical area as brides, than to marry across castes in the same area. It is also interesting to note that the catalyst for the 'crisis of the bloodline' is because the women from the family are choosing to exert their own forms of independence by working or migrating. They are, through the means of social and economic mobility available to them, imagining a life for themselves that goes beyond the conventional femininity expected of them; it is taking them outside the confines of marriage. Through Vinod's notes, we get a glimpse into why there are specific anxieties around women's exertion of independence and decision-making, as it has consequences on the 'sanctity' of dominant caste communities and the regulations of caste boundaries then have to shift (quite literally in this case) in order to ensure exclusivity and honour.

We, therefore, turn now to the cost at which these boundaries must be maintained, and the sites through which this policing takes place. Abdul works as a trainer on issues of gender and masculinity, in Western Gujarat. In one of our workshops, he shared an excerpt from his field notes: *Today I went for field work and was told about a case where a boy and a girl had fallen in love. They wanted to get married to each other, but they couldn't because they came from different castes. They were under pressure from their communities and local politicians in the area. They tried to*

elope, but the villagers found out about their whereabouts, caught them and brought them back to the village. They were brought in front of the caste panchayat. It was decided that the boy's family would be fined Rs. 50,000 and was forced to leave the village. The next day, the girl was auctioned for marriage. She could not raise her voice because of the pressure from the caste panchayat. She was married off to a much older, unemployed man who was known to be an alcoholic. There are several such cases in the area. In a different district, a couple was found dead, and it was claimed that this was an 'unnatural death' or suicide. But an investigation of the case revealed that it was an honour killing and the couple was murdered by the family in a secluded location. I have observed that if young people try and exercise their right to choose their own partners, they are punished in extreme ways - either through forcible marriage or death. I feel this is a very dangerous form of masculinity.

Abdul's notes reveal the inner workings of the manner in which informal, but powerful caste structures can exert specific forms of power within the community. As we know, '*Jaati*' *(*Caste) panchayats are an informal structure of governance, usually consisting of the elderly men in a given village. The men are typically from dominant castes, and lowered caste communities and women are rarely allowed to participate in these meetings. In Abdul's accounts, we can see the manner in which the moral and social weight of the panchayat is able to not only decide young people's course of life, but also is able to use various methods of sanction whether it is through fines, forceful marriage, or outright murder.

When we see 'masculinity' in these frameworks, it seems as though it is located in an individual body. But what happens when it is embodied as a community will? One of the reasons we are invoking the 'figure' of the caste panchayat is precisely to understand the manner in which a young girl's body, her life, and her agency are subject to the collective interests of an entire community, embodied by the caste panchayat. In fact, there is no space for individual desire or choice, because there is no individual that is allowed to exist outside this forced communal identity. Here, we might remember a point that was discussed in Chapter 1 of this study, about the social expectations/pressures of performing masculinity, versus the reality we might experience inside of us, or at a personal register. Through Abdul's notes, we see how various systems like the family, the community, the police, and the panchayat all work together as patriarchal institutions to serve caste interests. When patriarchal interests are threatened, there is an invocation of dominant masculinity that is able to use formal and informal justice mechanisms to exert violence on both women and lowered caste men's bodies.

Abdul's narrative can be placed within the large canvas of violence that is carried out in the name of honour killings[12] across the country, where murders of inter-caste or inter-religious couples are justified in the name of upholding community pride and dignity.

On listening to Abdul's notes, other ethnographers came forth with their experience and observation of caste panchayats. Sonia shares her experience from western Uttar Pradesh: *All caste groups have their own panchayat and assigned areas where they meet. For example, the lowered castes meet in a 'Chaupal' where all the community members have to contribute Rs. 400 to ensure a makeshift structure can be erected each time there is a meeting. The Jats, on the other hand, have a big building in the centre of the village where their meetings are held. All the leaders of the panchayat(s) are men. Women are not even allowed to be a part of the meetings.*

Jackson shares his experience from Jharkhand: *Every village and neighbourhood has a committee, which is the caste panchayat. They have a lot of rules for the village. For example, how it should function, property transactions, marital decisions and so on are all decided by the caste panchayat. If anyone transgresses these rules, their actions will be met with a hefty fine and even more serious, the threat of being outcast from the village, in which case even family support is withdrawn. Recently, I heard about an incident where a woman died, and people in the village alleged that she was a 'witch' and refused to give land to her family for her burial. Finally, another neighbourhood agreed to give land for the burial. But they had not taken the permission of the caste panchayat, and for this, they were heavily beaten. There are many cases like this that uphold the authority of the caste panchayat. In these cases, even the police cannot intervene.*

From Sonia and Jackson's experience, we see the way in which the caste panchayat orders everyday life, and their control over every aspect of decision making. Sonia's description of the panchayat shows us how caste also operates through a spatial domination, the 'chaupal' of the lowered castes, whereas dominant caste panchayats occupy a building in the centre of the village. These physical barriers exert a specific form of caste-based and gender-based masculinity that is built purely on the notions of exclusion; something also echoed in Justin's notes wherein the court's rules and regulations are primarily based on punitive actions of penalties and punishment, but also physical exclusion. Exclusion, therefore, appears to be a powerful tool used by specific forms of

12. https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2023/Sep/04/killing-honour-in-the-name-of-honour-killings-2611437.html

community-based masculinity, especially when it is exerted on those who, by virtue of their social position or social stance, exclude themselves from the rules, regulations, and norms of the community in which they inhabit. We see this primarily in the figure of the 'witch' and in the context of witch-killing. As we already know, most witch- hunting victims have been noticed as either, old, widows, or single women as well as those who have refused to adhere to social norms.

It is no coincidence that the deaths of these women who are branded witches, are often from lowered caste communities[13], and the reasons for 'branding' them as witches are quite instrumental: grabbing property, political jealousy, personal conflicts, getting sexual benefits, or settling old scores. Because these women, in some small way or big, have defied specific forms of will exerted by their communities, they face physical, economic, and cultural violence from social exclusion to being burnt alive. Exclusion, therefore, emerges as a central force in the way community masculinity is able to exert authority. It is used both as a corralling device and as punishment for those who have acted against dominant interests

13. With Hunting: A form of violence against Dalit Women In India, Tanvi Yadav https://www.jstor.org/stable/48643572

within the community.

Another way in which these community interests intersect with individual interests is evident in Roop's story, living in the old city of Hyderabad: *In my neighbourhood, violence is an everyday experience. One of my uncles used to beat his wife. Eventually, it got to a point where the family could not manage the situation and it was decided that the matter would be brought in front of the caste panchayat. The caste panchayat consisted of five (male) elders from the community. All of them collectively decided that my aunt should continue to stay with my uncle, in spite of the extreme violence she was facing. They assured her that there would be no more domestic abuse, but since it was necessary to uphold the family's reputation and honour, they could not allow her to leave him. This decision was announced to my aunt, in front of the entire neighbourhood, without taking her opinion into consideration. Of course, nothing changed and my aunt continued to suffer domestic abuse for years after that.*

From Roop's experience, we can also see that masculinities exhibited by communities easily penetrate family structure, and act against any kind of individual agency, in imposing its code of conduct, even at the cost of violence, as seen with Roop's aunt. The very nature of this informal structure, the lack of participation of women, the authority of dominant caste men, and the way in which decisions taken provide a window into the way masculinities as encapsulated within these informal structures have a severe impact on the agency and autonomy of women and lowered caste communities. The veneer that covers this kind of violence is often honour, which systematically denies women any forms of bodily integrity.

Neelam shares another painful experience: *A girl from a lowered caste family scored first division in her region. She was asked to come to the city for felicitation. Her father refused to send her because when the (dominant caste) found out, they declared that a young girl should not be sent to the city. But the girl was determined and she went anyway. When the news of her departure spread in the village, a group of the Jat elders visited her father and began instigating him saying that his daughter was probably going to meet boys in the city, that her education cannot be continued, because it is disrespectful to the family's honour. The father suffered terrible stress, which resulted in him committing suicide. When the girl returned home, she found her father hanging from a tree. A panchayat was called for, and the entire blame was placed on the daughter. She was not allowed to continue her education. She was publicly threatened saying that if she persisted, she would be the cause of death for her mother and brother as well.*

Neelam's writings point to the anxiety and fear that dominant caste communities display over the mobility or progress of lowered castes. They must be 'kept in the place' as is seen by the pressure placed by the Jats, driving the young girl's father to suicide. One can sense a similar anxiety in the public debates that emerged in the aftermath of the Mandal Commission's report on reservations, an attempt to block access to resources and knowledge for lowered caste communities. We can read into Roop and Neelam's experiences, a functioning of a collective masculinity that draws its power from the caste system. In the experience shared by Neelam, multiple masculinities are exerted – the Panchayat's invocation of their own right to discipline, their appeal to the father to exert his own measure of discipline, the manner in which the honour is located within the young girl's body and actions, and the manner in which the annihilation of the defiant body appears to be the 'logical' step to end the specific forms of conflict. The grotesque limits to which these community interests suppress individual agency, provides a window into the motivations of invoking community pride, a framework of community masculinity. From this example, we can see how a specific form of 'masculinity' is strategically used to conceal the real conflict- dominant castes fearing the mobility and progress of lowered castes.

From the examples above, we could arrive at an important aspect to consider: while masculinity must be disassociated solely from men, we also see how structures such as the caste system bestow power in the bodies of certain men. This requires us to pay attention to the intersection between caste and patriarchy and to observe the way in which this shapes masculinity/femininity. Here, it is useful to draw on the concept of Brahmanical Patriarchy[14], which structures gender relations in ways that benefit the dominant castes. If we follow this thought process, we can see how performances of masculinity and femininity shift across contexts of caste. For example, one can observe how upper caste women are usually kept within the confines of home, behind a veil, with strict restrictions on their mobility, while lowered caste women (primarily due to the need to survive) often have greater mobility and freedom in public space.

In our work at Maraa, with survivors of sexual violence, a conversation came up around the degrees of violence. One of the women shared: *Upper caste women face their own forms of violence, but the news will never carry these stories. It is only our stories that get shared and so people believe that it is only our communities that are violent.*

We can sense the implicit censorship that would keep these stories from emerging in the media, not to mention that since the media itself is

14. https://www.epw.in/engage/article/building-blocks-brahmanical-patriarchy

owned by dominant caste communities, these stories are unlikely to be featured. To speak of violence within the community would be to tarnish the honour of dominant caste communities and raise questions on its tightly regulated boundaries. Perhaps this is why, historically, violence against women programs have focused on women from marginalised communities. It is a lot more difficult to 'break the silence' within tightly enclosed dominant caste communities. In fact, when we spoke to civil society organisations as a preparatory work for this study, many shared the difficulty of engaging men and women from dominant caste communities because they felt any conversation around gender or masculinity would be a threat to the honour of their community.

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the blindspots this research study sought to address, is the way in which the discourse on masculinity has been situated within the experiences of marginalised communities alone. The literature around masculinities is filled with instances of toxic masculinity that seems to emerge almost naturally from the bodies of marginalised communities. We made an attempt to turn the gaze back on dominant caste communities, to examine the kinds of masculinities at play within their context.

Ramesh for instance, who comes from a dominant caste family in Madhya Pradesh, shares his insight: *In our community, families take loans just to be able to perform rituals as per certain community standards, even if they don't know how to repay the loans. There is a lot of unnecessary pressure. One day, my friend and I decided to protest this habit in our community. A thread ceremony was to be performed within a few families and we decided it should be a collective event, so that it reduces the overall burden of expenditure. We were hoping this initiative would encourage others to follow suit. We raised Rs. 70,000 from donations from community members. Shortly after, we received a call from our community committee. They objected saying we hadn't taken permission from them. When we explained our intention, they said that as younger members of the community, we should be collecting money to organise 'Shobha yatras' (pride marches) to showcase the wealth and dominance of our community. We argued saying that we stood against this kind of expenditure. They threatened us, saying we would be outcasted from the community. At this point, my family and friends began to get scared and convinced me to drop the idea. I tried to challenge this practice in my own house as well. Recently, the family wanted to get together for a 'Ramayan Bhandara', and I tried to convince them to organise a small pooja and give the rest of the money to an orphanage. No one listened to me. An older relative told me that I was standing against family and community pride and this was a mark of disrespect. Nowadays I have*

stopped saying anything. I just don't attend any of these functions as my mark of protest.

From Ramesh's writings, we see the importance of dominant caste communities to ensure that their self image, honour and pride are protected. It is not enough to only understand the boundaries of one's caste, it is also important especially for the dominant caste to ensure that this dominance is 'seen' and 'acknowledged'. This is done through specific forms of display, whether it is through rituals, showcasing of wealth and other ceremonies. Rituals like the one Ramesh shares above, are *both* acts of solidarity and exclusion bringing together a caste community as well as communicating the boundary to those outside the community. These messages are not only for those outside of the community, but also within the community, as Ramesh clearly articulates. The simple logic of caste-based or community-based masculinity is quite visible: Those who adhere to its rules are rewarded; and those who don't are isolated or punished.

These conversations of honour, of exclusion, of building specific boundaries allows us to move away from the singular body of the lone 'man' to a closer examination of social structures that can produce dominant forms of masculinity. Although often times, 'toxic' is invoked in the context of masculinity, and we see a description of certain

communities, usually marginalised communities, as embodying this toxicity, what is clear is that it is necessary to not only pay attention to what would be defined as 'toxic', but also investigate the circumstances in which this word is used. Especially when it is used in the context of marginalised communities, it would be useful to engage with the manner in these frameworks of 'toxicity' can be used to erase and invisibilise the systematic workings of dominant community masculinity that shape-shifts and invokes differential meanings of honour and pride to reinforce class-caste distinctions.

To understand this better, we turn to Dhananjay's writings. Dhananjay grew up in Anekal, on the outskirts of Bangalore. He says: *My friend Mohan is in his 30s. He is a smart guy with a lot of creative potential. But after dropping out from college, he fell in with a few gangsters. Mohan grew up in one of the Dalit colonies in Anekal. But he is from a higher sub-caste within the Dalit community. He made easy money by doing small scale robberies. Everything was going fine for him, until one day a gang war broke out. Mohan's gang was fighting against a prominent local leader from a ruling party. But a settlement happened on both sides and the matter fell silent. But the BJP leader bribed one of the gang members and asked him to bring the (other) gang members leader to a local bar at a particular time. He murdered him (the leader). After this, there was a huge strike against that leader in Anekal and he had to abscond for a year. Meanwhile, since the gang broke up, Mohan lost his livelihood. He tried to find a job in DHL, Puma, Amazon and Flipkart companies in the area but nobody hired him because he was a local boy. At last, a mobile box making company gave him a job. But the manager was paying very less and Mohan confronted him, at which point the line manager abused him and his mother and said, 'If you want to work here, work silently, otherwise you leave, there are many others like you.' Mohan got angry and punched him in the face. He was taken to the police station. Because he was previously a gang member, the police demanded 4-5 lakhs for his release and threatened to charge him for murder. A local political leader from the opposition party came and paid Rs. 25,000 for his release, following which they used Mohan for their election work without paying him anything. Mohan fell in love with a girl who was also working for the party, as a result of which he was thrown out of the party. Mohan found himself without a job again. He met someone else who was an IPL (Indian Premier League-Cricket) gambler. Together, they got a contract to become study subjects for a medical study, where they were to be paid Rs. 50,000 per session. Life was good, until the study came to a close. Meanwhile, Mohan got the contact for a weed peddler from Visakhapatnam and with the help of an auto driver, began to distribute weed in Anekal. However, the auto*

driver was caught by the police and the deal fell through. Now Mohan lends money to people for small amounts of time and meagre interest. He managed to give money home for his sister's marriage. In his younger days, Mohan's family used to pressurise him to earn and would make fun of him for being unemployed. They felt he wasn't a respectable man because he couldn't earn money. But I feel he was unemployed because no company would give him a proper job in the area. It was no fault of his. Now even though Mohan gives money back home, he still has not earned his family's respect as he still doesn't do any 'proper job'.

Dhananjay traces the way in which spaces inhabited by working class/ lowered caste populations begin to get marked as criminal hotbeds, leading to stereotypes about them and their ways of living. This fails to account for the structural conditions (unemployment, migration, local-migrant tensions) that produce criminality. He feels for his friend who had 'creative potential' that is unrealised because of the situation he finds himself in. The invocation of dignity in an otherwise disempowering situation points to the lack of structural choices that are open to Mohan. Regardless of what he does, Mohan, as Dhananjay notes, is unable to *'learn his family's respect'*.

Here, it might be useful to rely theoretically, on a prevailing feature of masculinity, that of 'mastery[15]'. A key feature of dominant masculinity is to make men think that they have power and omnipotence. However, this results in the systematic devaluing of fragility, frailty, and vulnerability within the framework of masculinity. Instead, from a young age, men are taught to aspire for mastery. Thus, when men are faced with difficult circumstances as what Dhananjay describes above, they are unable to be seen or see themselves as victims or survivors of oppressive structures. Instead, it can also exert pressure on them to master the circumstances, without providing any of the tools, space, or time to do so. The troubles that they then face become squarely their own responsibility, instead of the structures that place them in these vulnerable situations. The reason why Dhananjay's narrative is so powerful is because it allows us to see the systematic manner in which these structural forces entrap Mohan into pathways that are not of his choosing, and yet, for whom he is forced to take responsibility. It allows us to see him not as an object of criminality that surrounds him, but as a subject.

In a related study on masculinity, by CIEDS Collective and Gamana Mahila Samuha, a feminist collective based in Bangalore, the notion of honour is elaborated upon:

15. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/07/22/jacqueline-rose-power-of-questions/

Being a criminal is also considered honourable. Honour in this context can revolve around a man's ability to command deference in interpersonal relations. One of the major reasons that membership in gangs is so appealing is because the masculinity written therein is easily articulated and is easy to perform against a specific audience. It provides young, vulnerable, and marginalised boys and men blueprints on how to perform the masculine role. Moreover, what is often overlooked is that these memberships can be a valuable space for exchange of views, ideas, and feelings that are often absent in any other environments. Moreover, a life of crime and being part of crime syndicates also provide immense forms of social networks which can cut across discriminatory lines of social reproduction and social mobility. From what we have observed, for many boys, the life of crime creates an identity that is outside of the one ascribed to them through their material, physical, and social location in the town. Therefore, instead of engaging with entry into crime as a 'deviant' behaviour, it might be useful to engage with the prospect of entering a life of crime as a normative pathway for many boys who are located at the margins.

Maintaining honour, therefore, is not only a product of community masculinity exerting itself over a specific form of control over the female body; but it is also used as a way to fill a vacuum caused by structural conditions of neglect and criminalization. In specific circumstances, it allows young men, in particular, to refashion their identity, giving them a modicum of agency in an environment that is otherwise unforgiving, violent, and discriminatory. Therefore, just as we cannot imagine masculinity in a singular fashion, honour too cannot be seen only as a debilitating instrument.

Instead, we can start to uncover competing and contradictory impulses that shape masculinity by tracing the pathways of honour or pride. By paying attention to social-cultural context, we see how performances of masculinity shift across caste and class locations. We can start to see the nature of masculinity not only as an individual choice, but also as the organised thought process and behaviour of collective systems of power, such as caste and class. This opens up our view to the complex inter-web of relationships between structure and individuality which are not restricted to conversations of restrictions or imposition (even though they exist), but also of survival and reclaiming specific forms of spaces.

We end this section, therefore, with Roop's experience that provides us some measure of faith and belief in people's resilience in the face of oppression: *My family has historically been engaged in manual scavenging, and it is the women who have been the primary breadwinners. In spite of that, the power does not lie with the women*

in my family. My grandfather used to take away all the money earned by my grandmother. All the decisions were taken by him. There was a lot of domestic abuse within my family. After marriage, my mother, in spite of her education, was forced to take up scavenging work because of financial difficulties. She could not complete her education. In our community this is very common. There is a local saying, that children from our community grow up fighting with a sword. The 'sword' refers to cleaning toilets, which is our caste bound occupation. Ever since I was in school, I was made aware of my caste. Friends in school would often ask me which caste I belonged to. I used to come home and ask my mother why we were weaker than other caste groups. If I said I was Valmiki, then they would make us sit and eat separately. So, my friends and I would lie, saying we belonged to an upper caste community. We knew we couldn't say we were Brahmins, because everyone knew we ate meat. So, we said we were Rajputs. But we were always scared. If someone asked a follow up question, for example, what sub-caste of Rajput, we wouldn't know how to answer. It was risky to lie about our caste position in school.

One experience that remains in my mind is when I was accompanying a close friend of mine back home from school. She wanted to pick up a book from her house. As we got closer to her house, she told me to wait outside, at a distance from her house. I remember feeling really strange about this. When she returned, she said her mother told her not to be friends with me. At that time, I thought it was because something was wrong with me. As I grew up, I realised it was because of my caste. But that feeling of not being worthy, that feeling sticks on. It is difficult for people from our caste to find houses outside of Valmiki basti. It took us two years to find a house outside. Landlords outside the Valmiki basti don't give houses on rent to people from our community. Personally, I have always felt uncomfortable living in this area because it makes me feel defined by my caste identity. Last year, I moved out of my house and found myself a room in an area that is largely dominated by an OBC population. No one recognizes me here. Over the years, my way of speaking Hindi has changed and so has my clothing. So, no one can identify me by my caste position. Without hiding my caste, I wouldn't have gotten a room here. Growing up, I was always afraid I would be made to do the work my community has historically done. I have always tried to save myself from it. Somehow, I have been lucky enough to make my own future and now have the opportunity of working in an NGO.

Roop's notes are a revelatory account of the kinds of structural and social barriers lowered caste communities are faced with. She experiences multiple forms of oppression on account of being a lowered caste community woman. Whether it is in the form of material, psychological,

or spatial discrimination, there is a specific way in which '*that feeling of not being worthy, that sticks on*'. This is not too different from Mohan's account who cannot, regardless of what he does, cannot be or become a 'respectable' man. Thus, we see that the complexity of honour, respect, pride are important lenses to understand the stated 'rationale' for the systematic manner in which certain forms of masculinity. In this case, community masculinity invokes exclusion, violence, and discrimination. Just a few examples, including family honour being upheld at the cost of women's integrity and self-respect, lowered caste communities denied dignity, defying communities and creating life for oneself, allow us to explore the different ways in which honour is a noose. The threat of death and destruction is ever-present. The fact that the noose is held by communities and not by individuals provides us insights into the foundational nature in which masculinity is usually formed and invoked. It allows us to examine sites of masculinity that are *not* always located within the body of the male.

In this chapter, we focused on the interwoven notions of honour and caste. We now turn to a closely related aspect, that of labour and class, to go deeper into the way in which masculinity shapes/is shaped by our social identities.

Division of labour(er): Tracing Class and Masculinity

By Ram Bhat

The individual is formed continuously on the basis of his or her social relations with others in their society. Every society has individuals engaging in various modes of production (from outright bonded labour/slavery to feudalism to capitalist production) that tie individuals and groups in various forms of economic social relations. Therefore, if you follow the circulation and exchange of money as a substance, it is possible to draw an economic map of social relations. When certain patterns of economic relations get entrenched over time, individuals born in that society depending on their circumstances, often find that their *mode of production has been chosen for them rather than them choosing any mode of production of their own will.* Some individuals will have land, capital, or find themselves working in service industries, whereas other individuals will be forced to provide their manual labour for daily wages to employers operating different kinds of enterprises. In other words, the patterns of economic relations enable a

design for the division of labour where some will exploit labour, and others who experience this exploitation of their labour. The broad patterns of economic relations and the location of an individual within this network of economic relations plays a crucial role in shaping that individual - in terms of their attitudes, opinions and ideas, behaviours, and interactions.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that economic relations shape individuals and societies completely. In other words, class cannot be the only or the overarching category of analysis - whether it is a question of power (i.e., who dominates whom) or a question of subjectivity (i.e., our consciousness of who we are in terms of behaviour, attitudes, ideas, opinions etc.). Take caste identity for example. Caste identity is generated by a system that predates modern or even pre-modern modes of production. The caste system is at least two thousand years old and has radical implications on economic relations. The dominant castes have typically enjoyed access to knowledge and wealth while the lowered castes have typically been forced to engage in manual labour, but do not get to keep surplus value generated by their labour. The caste system, therefore, has its own logic for the division of labour long before modern economic systems were introduced in the subcontinent. This is why Dr. Ambedkar emphasised the *division of the labourer* in India, rather than merely the division of labour. Since the caste system is at least two thousand years old, it follows that patriarchal systems (since caste boundaries are enforced through endogamy) are also equally old (if not older) and also predate modern economic systems. It should be clear that while for theoretical purposes it may be possible to create seemingly pure categories such as caste, class, gender etc., in actuality, these intersect with each other (in different ways) for each individual. Depending on the circumstances which place people in different situations, one aspect of a person's identity may become more significant than other identities in that moment.

Let us return to the theme with which we began this chapter, namely, the link between economic relations and our identity. This chapter is an attempt to tease out what masculinity means for individuals and groups (varied in terms of caste, gender, and religious identity) in specific economic contexts. The chapter has excerpts from workers who work in large factories or warehouses and/or part of a worker's union; journalists, domestic work, care work inside the home, construction work, independent and small family-owned shop owners and workers. These experiences give us a good indication of how masculinity is shaped in the context of class relations without discarding the intersectionality of social life.

Invisible labour(er)s

As we already know, certain forms of labour are acknowledged as legitimate and as producing value while other forms of labour are invisible and under-valued or not valued. The systems linking particular forms of labour to (surplus) value is rather crucial in analysing how masculinity intersects with class. Socio-cultural norms have, by and large, restricted the role of women to the house, and that of men to public/workspace. These norms have especially developed in the post-colonial and nationalist context where Indian men saw the superiority of the British especially in terms of science, technology, economics, and knowledge. Any post-colonial future for India, therefore, would require that Indians too engage

and master science, technology etc. However, doing so would mean loss of tradition, loss of caste, loss of history - in short, a loss of identity. Therefore, the post-colonial nationalist context required a compromise where the men would go 'out' and even become westernised, wear shirts, trousers and work on strange, unfamiliar things, anything, as long as they are able to earn sufficient money and sustain the household. However, the women would stay 'in' and guard what is valuable, what is traditional, what is historic. The job of the woman in the post-colonial context is not so much to earn money as much as it is to represent and safeguard traditional identity.

The gendered division of space (home and outside) thus shapes the notion of value and labour. A woman's connection to the market and the public is derived from her connection to her husband and family. 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 - their careers will be less important than them fulfilling their role as mothers/wives. Additionally, caste also shapes both sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour.[16]

Although there is this neat division of labour, there is a systematic invisibilisation of work that women do, whether within the home or outside of it. In general, whether for men or for women, work is hierarchical – valuable and valued work is often concentrated alongside power and privilege. Additionally, reproductive labour – sexual labour, household work and taking care of the family – all are considered to be well-within the domain of women. However, these are not only highly invisible, but precisely because of their nature, also highly devalued.

Abdul shares an anecdote from one of his sessions with young men in western Gujarat which is illustrative of this gendered division of labour: *Recently, in one of my training sessions, a student commented that men only work during their job. But a woman manages the household work, which includes taking care of her children, cleaning her husband's clothes, preparing his tiffin and dropping it off and even ensuring that his footwear is in the correct place. To cook for him and make sure nothing is lacking in the food, to serve him, and then, finally, to wash his plate. All the man has to do is earn. If a woman dares to ask for the help of a domestic worker, or if she tries to take some rest in the middle of the day, then she is taunted and insulted by the family. She can't even take a moment's rest in front of the elders in the family, or eat when the men of the family sit down to eat. Would a man be able to manage all this work?*

16. https://www.india-seminar.com/2018/710/710_sharmila_rege.htm#:~:text=Drawing%20upon%20Ambedkar's%20analysis%2C%20caste,and%20division%20of%20sexual%20labour

Why is 'care work', as a form of labour, de-valued in this way? According to a World Bank report released in June 2022, participation of women within India's labour force has been steadily declining since 2005. The claim is that patriarchal oppression and structural barriers are the main causes for this decline. Even if these arguments do contain some truth to them, they fail to acknowledge that this measure (participation in the labour force) does not capture women's participation in the *informal* economy. In India, women are concentrated in the informal sector and demonstrate a preference for home-based work opportunities that allow them to balance their domestic duties with income-generating activities.[17] So, it is not that women are not 'working', but that their work is not counted as 'work'.

Part of the reason is that the value of work is assessed by masculine standards - presence in the public sphere, high prestige or high value work. Another reason is that care work (a primary mode of production that women participate in) is not seen as work. In fact, care work, unlike most other forms of labour, is *not* commodified, is not linked to market forces, is not (yet) exchangeable with money.

In a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production, the domains that remain outside the reach of capital circulation come under scorn and contempt, as if non-capitalistic labour is not really labour. The quote above concludes with a rhetorical question of whether a man would be able to manage all that a woman manages on her own. What we see here is the kind of masculinity that appears to be progressive, but not only fails to recognise the drudgery involved in care work, but also negates men's role from ever being associated with that kind of work. The 'natural' division of this labour into feminine and masculine serves this kind of 'progressive' masculinity which is focused on recognition of women's labour as a way to ensure that she continues to find 'social and cultural' value in it, rather than engaging with radical ways to create equal burdens of labour or engage with the manner in which this very important work can be re-distributed or fundamentally re-imagined or transformed.

The young man who points out the imbalance of gendered labour in the quote above also makes a passing reference to the woman of the house getting help from a domestic worker. What happens when a domestic worker comes into the house?

First and foremost, domestic work gets separated from care work. Domestic work is commodified and converted to wage labour and

17. https://theprint.in/opinion/what-reports-on-indian-womens-falling-participation-in-labour-force-dont-tell-you/1311436/

enters the capitalist mode of production, i.e. materially producing and reproducing the household in daily life. It should be clear that the separation of domestic and care work does not affect the gendered division of labour as a whole; it merely transfers the domestic work from the woman of the house to another woman on wages. And in the course of this 'transfer' the employers (both men and women) often display an aggressive masculinity towards domestic workers, as a member from a domestic workers union, interviewed for this study, shares with us: *We see five-six cases of the violence meted out to domestic workers by female employers almost daily. In a recent case, both employers were doctors, well-educated. When they came home, the domestic worker was sitting on the sofa. The female employer beat her up badly. She protested saying her back was hurting and she only sat to get a few minutes of rest. The woman responded saying she had no right to sit on their furniture. The domestic worker complained to other workers in the area, and close to 100 gathered together in front of the house. The woman employer then began to slap herself claiming the domestic workers had attacked her. It eventually became a police case, and we had to get the domestic worker out on bail.*

In one of our monthly meetings, where we were discussing the relationship between class and masculinity, Suresh made a compelling argument for why the labour of working class and oppressed caste groups are not considered labour, naturally so when the labourers themselves are not acknowledged as human in the first place: *Women's contribution to the economy is often seen in the tertiary sector, is not seen as a contributor but more in terms of service provider. A certain modernity or upward mobility is seen as a gender revolution - like women being allowed to work late, or go out at night. This appears new, but that is because the experiences of working class and oppressed castes is not considered. Their labour is not considered - for example, cleaning streets, toilets, sorting out waste, sex work, artisans, care and nurturing services, domestic work, and many more come under this line of work.*

Looking solely at the experiences of middle and upper middle-class women, within the nationalist movement, a dichotomy is created between public and private, home and outside, material and cultural, which ignores the experiences of working-class women. Suresh's notes point to our collective blindness about the experiences of working-class women for whom there is no division between public and private, for whom public space has always been the work space. As the anecdote of the domestic worker beaten for sitting on a sofa illustrates, often the only protection for such invisibilized workers and labour is for the workers themselves to come together. Domestic work like many other forms of gendered labour,

is not considered formal labour as we have already discussed earlier. Secondly, given the strong force of identities in this country, mobilising and uniting workers from diverse identities can be challenging.

Members of the domestic workers union shared that their caste position dictates the kind of work they can do. For example, dominant caste workers will secure jobs for cooking/cleaning/ caring for children, while those lowered in the caste hierarchy are often given the task of cleaning and sweeping. Further, even within the union, there are various hierarchies of caste and religion. As members of the domestic worker union shared, most of their membership comprises women from various sub-castes within the Dalit community. They shared that it was increasingly difficult for Muslim women to secure work. This is reflected in their membership, where only 5% of their membership comprises of Muslim women. The rest of the workers are Hindu. Violence follows a graded system, employers are usually upper caste and discriminate against the workers. But there are degrees of discrimination between the workers themselves, depending on which sub-caste is higher than the other.

As noted earlier in this chapter, caste and religious identities predate and persist in spite of what should have been obvious class-based solidarities. In the case of a male workers union, masculinity comes to the rescue, as a site to suture solidarity across caste differences. A founding member of a union shares: *We have seen many forms of masculinity, and sometimes we have to use it for our benefit. The workers who are part of our union are humiliated almost on a daily basis. To affirm masculinity, to believe that you can fight for your rights, it gives them a sense of power. Sometimes it helps in providing men with a positive outlook in their lives.* [The membership of the union is largely from Dalit and Adivasi communities.] *You are made to feel powerless on an almost daily basis, because of your class and caste identity. Most workers are afraid of asking for their basic rights like minimum wage, because of the backlash they face from their employers, who are from dominant caste communities. In this context, a positive affirmation of masculinity can help them lose their fear and believe in themselves. Often when workers are afraid to take action, we use the popular saying, 'Chudi pehna do' (Why don't you wear bangles?) to indicate that they are being weak. We use this as a tactic to mobilise the workers into action. It usually works, and the workers are convinced to take up action.*

In this quote, there is no reference to caste-based discrimination or religious discrimination between the workers themselves (as was the case with the domestic workers union). Instead, we have an account of lowered caste workers who are afraid of asking for their rights. This fear, presumably, comes from a compounding of caste and economic

oppression that the workers face from their employers. The exhortation to 'be a man' by discarding the symbolic bangles acts as a tactic to counter or overcome this fear which in turn is seen as weakness. While the tactic seems to work in the short term, these tactics are clearly doing women a disservice, framing them inherently as weak, fearful, and unable to take any action, i.e, incapable of exercising their agency. There is no doubt that taking action against exploitation is of paramount importance, especially by mobilising the strength of the labourforce which is necessarily much larger than the employers.

However, it should be possible to work with fear and build strength without necessarily emphasising masculinity with action, that too in a negative way, by emphasising weakness with femininity. Strangely, this very logic can be seen in all women's unions as well from a slightly different perspective: *Age is a huge factor that needs to be considered. Younger members are not given leadership roles, their opinion is not considered. They are often bullied and humiliated by older members in the union. This is playing out even in all women's unions!* shared a member of the union. The founder of the union shares that it is doubly challenging to work in an all-women's union, because one is fighting for the rights of both workers and women. '*Sometimes as women, we ourselves accept masculinity, almost like a tradition. We exert masculinity over each other. We have to constantly reflect on our own systems of organising, mobilising, and communicating to ensure that while we are fighting for our rights as workers, we are not reproducing masculine structures that further marginalise us as women.*'

Is it possible to discover a shared masculinity (or femininity) that comes from shared class interests that could potentially counter religious and caste-based differences, hierarchies, and antagonisms? Such a shared masculinity need not refer to the weakness of femininity, but rather draw solidarity from the shared experiences of labour that shape the way they become 'workers' on a daily basis. Even though other and older identities persist, there is undoubtedly a strong influence exerted by economic relations in a very material sense that is hard to ignore or underplay.

Listening to the experiences of construction workers (in Bengaluru) sheds light on the forms of violence emerging from structural conditions*: If you visit a labour colony in the city, there are only three toilets amidst 35 quarters. To use the toilet, you have to wake up at 4.30 am. Within an hour, running water will stop. The rooms are so small that you can't sleep lying down straight.*

Living and working conditions also produce specific kinds of violence, most typically associated with a form of toxic masculinity. In the development sector, we often encounter the term 'toxic masculinity',

without necessarily understanding or identifying the underlying structural conditions of this toxicity. More often than not, the construction of 'toxic masculinity' is produced by violence-as-event since it focuses on the ahistorical individual in the moment of perpetrating physical violence, and so implicitly attributes the violence to the character of the individual (moral failing, greed, alcoholism etc.) and thus, reduces the individual to that action. When we start to examine patterns of how this toxicity emerges, we find a strange resonance with the strategies that unions employ to mobilise workers. For example, founding members of the union shared that when a worker joins, they try to understand his life history, the history of his community, and the area he comes from. For example, a member shares: *Rajputs have always had a history of never turning their back on the battlefield. Similarly, other communities have a historical legacy of having fought for their rights. This ideal of masculinity continues to influence men today, a tradition of answering back to power. Sometimes, we have to use the community history of masculinity as a tool to declare and assert our identities as workers.*

Members of the union choose to define masculinity as a 'layered' system of inequality: *If you observe how contract labour is organised, it is very hierarchical. The helper, the mistry, the unskilled workers, the skilled workers and finally, the contractor. Similarly, there is a regional hierarchy. For example, workers from Bihar are not valued in Rajasthan. Local labour definitely has more power. Women workers are hardly recognized within the construction industry. So, depending on your position on the ladder, you will exert a different kind of masculinity.*

Appealing, therefore, to the character of an individual, and reducing that character to an action, (instead of focusing on creating a collective identity that moves through and against traditional identifiers) is a marker of this form of masculinity. While this can be attributed to the neoliberalisation of labour through casualisation (contract work) and privatisation etc, these forms of masculinity point to a much more systemic system of inequalities that creates hierarchies and divisions of labour based on compound identities, that are an amalgam of gender, caste, class, language, region, and sector of employment. Unsurprisingly, women are more often found at the bottom of this hierarchy than at upper levels. Rather than focusing on breaking the glass ceiling, often a concern only for upper caste women, it might be much more useful to challenge the masculine structure itself that asserts these forms of dominance of relationships not only in the labour markets, but also in labour unions.

Psychologically, many workers agitate in anger, after succumbing to unreasonable and inhuman rules at work. We can see that there is a lot of effort built to break unity between workers, but the servility, humility, the

everlasting indebtedness that the worker has to bear both in organised and unorganised is worth considering in the context of masculinity. In the way in which one male body interacts with another, where power dynamics between them reflect how they behave. For example, a landlord or a contractor at a construction site wears a very different body language, that of always sitting on a chair, surveilling, paying the worker whose body is usually bent with eyes to the ground, not questioning any form of humiliation or injustice or discrimination projected on him. In some ways, the worker becomes a silent receiver. This worker body accumulates insults and suppresses emotions because he has to be in control of the situation. It is the desperate need for capital that keeps him at bay and does not let power equalise. But with time, this same body tears apart and there could be a bestial outburst, where the two competing masculinities are at play - the system and the employee, the oppressor and the oppressed, the boss and the worker. This rage cannot be contained and can have severe ramifications against the system. It is usually perceived as dangerous, irrational and unexpected. This is often labelled as a form of anarchy or naxalism, which is a political reaction towards claiming equity, but in the context of masculinity, such behaviour can also be read as an emotional outburst, where the threshold of tolerance cannot be held any

longer. When the melancholia, the fatigue, and the preoccupations of the worker are not considered by the employer and the system, the worker strikes back with fierce and tragic action.

The emergence of the ‘Angry Young Man’ in socialist India is a reckoning of how the system can directly affect the psyche of an individual to drive him to take political action against the system that produces this very violence. The contract labour systems, however, discourage unionisation and fear is filled within the informal sector and gig economy workers. Driven by capitalism, this form of labour is devoid of dignity, where the worker is reduced to a number and is under high levels of surveillance by the employer and the client. The worker operates in fear as he knows he is easily dispensable.

Within trade unions themselves, we see that different forms of leadership are based on masculine principles or values. Women rarely get to even occupy these spaces, much less radically transform them. For example, while women might rise to become an area coordinator, she cannot challenge the structure of the trade union, which is often male dominated and bureaucratic in its functioning. Representation of women in trade unions continues to be very low. A senior member of the union, who is also a domestic worker, reflected: *Unions are not ready to change their ways of working. For example, women cannot attend late night meetings. They have to take care of their children and family responsibilities. The expectation of a ‘worker’ within the union is still highly masculine’.*

Another member shared that during trade union meetings, if a woman representative shares her opinion, male union members have the tendency to interrupt her, or even simply walk out of meetings. This is a historical problem with how the understanding of ‘union’ and ‘labour’ has developed across the world. The dominant understanding is that labour is strictly restricted to workers selling their labour for wages, thus ignoring other kinds of labour including non-wage labour and reproductive labour, both of which have been emphasised by feminist Marxist movements. Subsequently, because of this narrow definition of labour, unions have restricted their operations to workplaces that provide wages in return for workers selling their labour power. Work at home or other kinds of work have been ignored by unions (save a few exceptions). Again, this is not just about changing the working of unions, but a fundamental rethinking on categories of labour and the principles of unionising.

This is precisely what is echoed by members of both unions. They shared that while work continues toward strikes and protests, there is no consistent work on ensuring ideological change within union members. For example, while workers might demand equal rights in the workplace, chances are that when he/she returns home, the same gender roles and

division of labour remains intact. This requires space for reflection and internalisation of values which is not prioritised as urgent or important in the scope of union work. Finally, both unions shared that their struggle is to change the outlook of dominant caste/class publics toward the worker: *It has become fixed in the public's eye that the worker is a victim. 'Bechara'. The complexity of a worker's experience is not understood. They are reduced to the work that they do or the caste identity that they are from. We are working hard to ensure that this public perception is changed and the dignity of workers is realised.* The shared conditions of labour is an opportunity to build class-based solidarities for men and women *through* (not bypassing) other identities such as caste and religion. In such solidarities, what it means to be men and women or queer in an embodied sense (i.e., masculinity or femininity) will emerge from the influence exerted by economic relations on the bodies and minds of the labourers.

The gender-ing of work

Neelam from Uttar Pradesh shares: *I am ridiculed a lot for my work. People say I only do award-winning stories i.e. stories that will get me an award but not the 'real stories'. Recently, I started my YouTube channel in collaboration with a senior journalist who is a man. He regularly tells me that my story is only popular because he writes the headlines. When I won the Chameli Devi award, he said it was because my story was edited by him. These comments used to really affect me. I used to think that I have done no work; it is only because a senior journalist wrote five words as the headline that people read my article!.*

While the section above looked at the invisibilization of labour, in this section, we turn to experiences of masculinity and misogyny, within formal sectors of work. When women enter the workforce, they often have to navigate through various forms of patriarchy and masculine control. There is a specific manner in which masculinity is framed against women's work force participation - in that knowledge systems are traditionally in the domain of men, and even when women enter the field, they are taking on the position of not being native, but a visitor or an interloper. Neelam's account above, clearly reveals the insecurity caused by the visibility of women within the workspace. Her achievements are demeaned by the senior journalist who asserts his experience over her hard work. Neelam's capacity to work is predetermined by her gender identity. As she shares: *Any big reporting assignment is always given to a male reporter. Recently there was a rape case against a girl from a lowered caste community, and no arrest had been made for over two months. I asked permission*

to go cover the story, but my boss kept trying to dissuade me saying that I would get beaten up and it would be unsafe. Eventually, he said I could go at my own personal risk, but should something happen, the organisation would not stand by me. I went and brought back the details to write up the story. Right then, a senior journalist came and asked who gave me permission to cover a crime story. He claimed only men can cover crime stories because female reporters are just not capable. At every step, I have to work harder than the men in my office to prove myself, just because I am a woman.

The misogynist reduction of Neelam's expertise to her gender ensures that many aspects of her personhood are erased. In the editor's response, we see once again how women are associated with 'softer' aspects,

whereas the gritty world of crime and violence must be left to the men. Even though in our country women are engaged in not only household labour but also do agricultural labour, construction work and other forms of hard physical labour, it is assumed that they will not be able to 'manage real labour'. In the world of media, we see this division playing out in the choice of targeted content in newspapers/magazines where subjects pertaining to fashion, cosmetics, the household are considered of interest only to women, whereas politics, the economy, breaking news is targeted toward male consumers. These taunts appear to be a shared understanding of the cultural and social norms that appear to cut across gender lines. For example, Neelam says that her female friends often dominate and taunt her saying, '*Oh you have become a big reporter now. Your phone is always busy; you don't have time for your friends. You've put your job in front of everything else.*' These taunts reveal the stigma faced by ambitious women who are routinely shamed for prioritising their careers over what is considered their 'traditional' role, as partners, wives, and mothers.

Class disparity as a form of masculine ideology is not restricted to the workspace alone. Consider these experiences from our researcher Ruby: *My father had a small electric shop. One day, there was a short circuit and the shop burnt down. All the material inside was also destroyed. We didn't have any money. My father's elder brother told us to come to Maharashtra. My father felt the educational opportunities for all of us would also be better there, so my parents took the decision to move. We lived there for 11 years. My father began to work for his brother's shop where he was paid only Rs. 2,000 per month. My uncle used to pay the other workers between Rs. 5,000 - 6,000 per month, but he refused to pay my father more. One day, we desperately needed money so my father asked my uncle for a loan. He refused, even though my father knew that he (my uncle) regularly gave loans to the workers in his shop. I will never forget the day this happened, because it was the first time I saw tears in my father's eyes. He felt that he had always stood by his brothers, but now, in our time of need, no-one stood by him. After that day, I have come to believe that money defines relationships. Only people who have money get dignity in this society.*

Ruby's anecdote reveals the powerlessness experienced due to economic vulnerability, which puts into jeopardy men's views of themselves and others' view of them as strong and capable. Vulnerabilities in men are not always acknowledged, and the manner in which hierarchies in class can play out within the family (and not across other class groups) provides us an additional dimension on the complexity with which masculinities are woven through these intersectional spaces. Class, therefore, is as

important for our understanding of masculine assertion (either through ridicule or degradation) as other forms of identity markers.

An experience of 'reminding someone of their place in society' is shared by Rachel: *My father gave up working when my brother and I were in our teens. He was tired of working since he was 16, and looking after his family after his father's death. My mum, being the sole earning member, began throwing her power and privilege around. She tried to emasculate my father with her behaviour and words, trying to demean him in our eyes. I regret not standing up for him. I think my younger brother carries this regret too. Even though he was a good father who struggled to take care of our needs, he often displaced his anger on us, in the form of physical and verbal abuse. But my mother was more forceful. She was also more educated than my father, so she would belittle him a lot. My mother was well-dressed, well-educated. Every week she would have a new dress that her parents would pay for whereas my father's family was more simple. My mother used to behave like the Queen Bee. Toward the end of her life, she mellowed down. She would often say that she didn't want to meet my father in the afterlife. Because of the way she had treated him.*

What this example clearly indicates is that specific forms of class privileges bestows upon a body (any body – male or female) specific ways through which domination can be exercised. When economic power is intertwined with domination and exploitation, then, it also starts to interfere with the traditional forms of patriarchal constructs (the husband dominating over the wife), and even banal objects like a sofa or clothes, can become contested sites of power and control. Thus, there are significant ways in which different forms of masculinities (class over family) jostle within each other as a way to frame not only narrative experiences, but also lived realities.

Transforming landscapes and class relations

In Anekal (on the outskirts of Bangalore) the community is very mixed. There are many handlooms and powerlooms and with the growing urbanisation, there has been large scale deforestation. When industries started acquiring land, farmers suddenly became rich people. First came the pharma industries, then the garment industries which had a demand for a huge female workforce. In a short span of time, there was Amazon, DHL, and other large companies. Over a period of time, farmers lost their land because of their poor financial decisions. They spent it on depreciating assets. Parallel to this, huge universities like Alliance have also come in. There is a huge change in the matrix of living.

Most of the housewives joined garment factories and began taking up financial responsibility at home. Rising demand for workers meant the local landowners also joined work. Residential layouts began to develop. With that, there began an influx of migrant workers, for construction and industrial work. Industrialists began to prioritise hiring migrants over the local workforce. Locals were removed for their 'misbehaviour'. In this rising frustration, many locals beat up their managers. Now, if we tell any company we are locals, they won't hire us. This has caused a lot of unemployment. With this, has grown a demand for drugs and subsequently led to a rise in crime. The police, and general societal perception is that the Dalit areas are responsible for the criminalization. The politicians started taking advantage of these loopholes and began using criminalised youth for their own crimes.

Dhananjay's notes are a portrait of a landscape in flux. By tracing changes in economic relationships, he describes the impact on the socio-cultural relationships, ethos, and values of life. Anekal is well-known in media reports as a criminal hotbed, although very few reports investigate the reasons behind the rise for crime. Dhananjay, who was born and grew up in Anekal, is witness to the structural conditions that have transformed the character of Anekal from an agricultural belt into an industrialised town. This transformation has resulted in changes in gender dynamics, in the home, public and workspace.

A published study on masculinities, by a women's rights organisation that has worked for several years in Anekal, traces how the rising participation of women in the work-force has led to an increase in their mobility, as well as, a rise in cases of violence in public space and the work space. Most of the women work in garment factories, which are known for poor working conditions and work-place harassment. However, due to family pressure and fear of losing jobs, these cases are rarely reported. The causes are linked to the stereotype of Anekal as a criminal hotbed, which as Dhananjay indicates above, becomes cause for further harassment and targeting of Dalit and Adivasi communities. The changing economic landscape of Anekal from agrarian to semi-industrial leads to unemployment and tensions between local and migrant populations. He foregrounds how unemployment can lead to a crisis in masculinity, because men are traditionally expected to earn and provide for their families. Instead, we see that the harsh economic conditions ensure specific forms of feminisation of labour, thereby leading to a rescripting of both traditional masculine and feminine roles.

In the chapter on Honour and Pride, we shared Dhananjay's reflections on his friend Mohan, which manifests several complexities of masculinity in relation to the changing economic landscape of Anekal. Mohan's struggle to gain 'respectable' employment leads him into various transactions with local gangs, politicians, and company managers - what is evident from each interaction is the disposability of young people like Mohan, who are used by people in power for various ends. As Dhananjay shared in writing workshops during the course of this study, Mohan's experience is typical to Anekal where young people, with potential and promise, slowly begin to decline into a life filled with crime, debt, and insecurity. There are several causes for this as Dhananjay's account illustrates - the preference for migrant workers, the co-option of unemployed youth into gang business, the corruption within political parties, and the targeting of vulnerable communities by the police. This manifests as violence between men and in relation to women. As Dhananjay reflects, the transformation of Anekal, from an agricultural economy, to the precarity of contract work, leads to a dilution of stability, which affects the ways in which young men perceive and are forced to assert themselves. Dhananjay's account also reveals another important aspect: crime as a performance of masculinity. Usually, it is assumed that young men turn to crime because of a lack of employment opportunities. While this is partially true, there is a need to delve deeper into the appeal of crime.

In the context of Anekal, criminality and honour are intimately linked for many boys located at the margins. There is a mirror opposite perspective from Uttar Pradesh where dominant castes also practise a masculinity

where criminality and honour are intimately linked. Sonia, lives in Western Uttar Pradesh and works as a block level officer. She also works with an organisation which aims to promote constitutional values and challenge caste and religious divisiveness. Given that both areas of her work allow her to interact with people across the caste-class spectrum, Sonia's reflections astutely reveal the ways in which masculinity and caste-class dominance feed each other.

Everyone takes the poor for a ride. If you don't have money in this world, you don't have a voice. In a recent case, some men from a dominant caste community attacked the children from a lowered caste community. When the children told their parents, their mothers picked up sticks and went to attack the men. But the men overpowered the women, and they were both unconscious. Because the women were from a poor family, the men were able to get away with it. I met a woman who works in the field of the dominant castes in our village. She told me that the landlord (owner of the field) repeatedly abuses her. But because she needs the job, she is unable to complain against him. He threatened her saying that if she tells someone, he will fire her from work. Similarly, the panchayat had decided to allot some land to dig a well. The dominant castes in the village refused to give up their land. Without asking permission, they instead evicted the lowered caste houses and began digging their land. They knew there would be no protest, because they cannot afford to protest.

As articulated by union members of construction workers earlier in this chapter, positions on the class-caste hierarchy influence social power. This, in turn, shapes expressions of masculinity. However, this should not be taken in a fatalistic sense that social position (in the class-caste-gender hierarchy) *determines* one's capacity to act and live in the world. In the two chapters above, we see how honour, caste, power and class intersect and shape the material and symbolic frameworks around masculinity.

In the next chapter, we turn to another mechanism through which normative masculinity is produced and gains legitimacy: through the construction of difference and in the creation of the 'other'.

Constructing the 'Other': Differences and Stereotypes

By Angarika Guha and Ram Bhat

In this chapter, we try to delve deeper into the mechanisms that produce and construct normative forms of masculinity. By 'normative', we try to expand upon RW Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity, by drawing attention to how 'dominance' is produced and structured, specifically in the context of our subcontinent. This means taking into account class, caste and religion, as specific markers of our social and cultural organisation. How do these social identities interact to shape and influence masculinity?

We already know that normative forms of masculinity are an aspiration and ideal, primarily, because of the social, economic, and political power and control that performing this kind of masculinity offers. In the following section, we try to examine *how* 'normative' masculinity is produced. One of the major fulcrums of 'how' appears to be a deliberate and elaborate process of 'othering'. By 'othering', we mean the process by which we define ourselves by what *we are not,* and by excluding others as a way of ensuring belonging. We argue that these structures of exclusion and othering can potentially result in the emergence of a dominant masculinity.

Of belonging and exclusion

When we asked the ethnographers to share what they would identify as the normative or dominant masculinity they perceive within themselves and those around them, we received a large range of responses.

Let us begin with Ramesh who writes: *I was around 17 years old and I lived in a mixed settlement, where people from all faiths resided. I strongly felt that India had one primary religion which was Hindu. I felt Muslims were immigrants. I never read any communal riot as violence. I felt it was the nation's right to cleanse people of different faiths. It was only when I began doing theatre and meeting different kinds of people that my perspective began to change. I remember meeting a facilitator from a different faith who greeted us with 'Jai Siya Ram'. I was taken aback. I had a long conversation with him, and began questioning my own beliefs. When did this religious ideology get fixed in my head?*

I don't even pray everyday in my house. I am an atheist. Then, why was I willing to stand for this dominant ideology that does not respect other faiths? I ask myself why had I bought into popular stereotypes about people from other faiths? Even though we are from a dominant religious identity, I still feel afraid. In all the historical accounts we have been taught, they always present Muslims as conquerors. The news keeps reporting how their population has drastically risen. These are still doubts in my mind. Hypothetically, if I am driving and a car hits me, and if the other driver is from another religious identity, my first reaction will be that it is a person from that identity. If he is from the same religion as me, I might not even say anything, but if they are from a different religious identity, I tend to become aggressive. I feel I have power over them somehow. Since my childhood, I have been taught to treat them differently and it is very difficult for me to unlearn it. I have overcome my prejudice over caste differences. I can sit with anyone and eat now. But I still struggle with religion, in spite of all the exposure I have had. I am constantly looking for literature to counter this attitude in me, but the propaganda from the other side is also very strong. Even though I know films like the Kerala Story are not based on facts, I sometimes wonder if it is a true story. Could it have happened? I can't share these doubts openly with anyone, particularly, not in my family, because they would suspect my intentions. I don't have any answers yet. But I want to keep asking myself tough questions.

It isn't easy to question our own prejudices, particularly in the case of beliefs around religion and faith which many people hold close to their heart. In the excerpt above, Ramesh tries to untangle his own thought process to arrive at why he is unable to let go of his suspicion and aggression toward other religious communities.

In spite of having grown up around people from all kinds of faiths, Ramesh believes in the primacy of his religion – but he is also not above questioning his own belief systems about it. In Ramesh's writing, we can see different thought processes in conflict - his own experience growing up in a mixed faith community, the people he meets from other religious communities who defy his stereotypical imagination, his scepticism and belief in the media he consumes. All of these would be unremarkable unless we take into consideration the socio-political climate in which he is asking these questions.

It is difficult these days to ignore the different ways in which religion is at the centre of political thought and discourse. Because there is a specific manner in which these discourses can easily turn into conversations of distrust, hate, and antipathy, there is a potential in which the political lines are being drawn on bodies that are either marginalised or are the 'subject'

of the debate. Bodies in power are also not exempt from this scrutiny. In short, to question boundaries of caste/religion is to invite censure, as is evident from Ramesh's reluctance to discuss his doubts openly with his family. Ramesh is perhaps able to see through the way stereotypes are constructed. And yet, he is unable to completely dismiss what he feels *almost instinctively*, as we see in his example of the car accident. In fact, it is interesting that Ramesh gives the example of a car accident. Road rage is often seen as a display of masculinity, as it is largely men who are seen driving vehicles. Road rage is often less about traffic rules and more about showing dominance and prowess on the road. If the hypothetical example were to come true, one wonders about how the altercation between Ramesh, a man from a dominant caste and religion and a man from a minority religion would end up? Who will everyone else on the 'road' likely to side with? It is also interesting to note how Ramesh himself contrasts what he knows - the 'facts' with an almost indescribable 'instinct' which is the result of his social conditioning. His voice of reason tells him that stereotypes around the Muslim communities are propaganda, but he is unable to shake off his own sense of unease. This is important to make note of in efforts to counter propaganda. Most often, approaches rely on producing alternate facts/statistics, but the everydayness of suspicion/ unease runs at a deeper intuitive level that perhaps requires a different, more visceral engagement.

Let us take another response to the same question, this one is from Abdul, who shares his experience from training sessions with young boys on issues of gender and masculinity, in Gujarat. *The slogan 'Beti padhao, Beti bachao'*[18] *has become very popular across all faiths of people in India. But education has come to mean religious education or imparting religious propaganda. Girls are warned against falling in love with boys from another faith, especially from the dominant faith. They are told to listen to their parents, and to not go out unsupervised. The fear is understandable. Interfaith love is used as a strategy to bring girls back to a dominant religion. In a recent Instagram reel, local leaders were openly saying they will support the efforts of boys taking this up in the area. I can see a shift in the young men and boys, when they come for training sessions and I ask them for their name and they proudly say, 'I am associated with the majority of this country. This happens very often in our workshops. Films like the Kashmir Files and the Kerala story are also very effective in influencing mindsets.'*

From Abdul's notes, we can sense the way in which fear is being

18. A scheme launched by the current government in 2015 in response to the declining child sex ratio. The scheme is meant to ensure that parents can save funds toward the higher education of their girl children.

manufactured against communities who do not conform to the majoritarian religion. In our group meetings, Abdul also shared his own fear as a facilitator from a minority community who is actively initiating conversations on these subjects. As we learnt from Dhananjay's notes in the chapter on honour, there might be various reasons for why young people, particularly young men, choose to side with what they perceive as power. It might not always be ideologically motivated, as seen in the case of Ramesh above. It might be due to economic vulnerability, a lack of community belonging, a diminished sense of self-worth, or as a way of reinstating honour in environments of discrimination and humiliation. Perhaps, these forms of antipathy are cultivated as a way of regaining power/asserting power, by the means of instilling fear in others who we perceive as weaker/inferior.

We also see a continuation from the observations in the previous chapters when compared to Abdul's notes on how young girls often become the targets of this othering. This serves the purpose of discouraging inter-religious relationships, similar to the function of honour that we saw in a previous chapter. From Ramesh and Abdul's notes, we get a sense of the current socio-cultural-political landscape in which relationships between different castes and religious identities are tense and fractured. We see that majoritarian cultures of religion and caste can set the foundation for violence against those who do not conform to, or are not accepted into these cultures. Often, this violence takes place through a performance of dominant masculinity, as seen in the example of the criminalization of inter-religious relationships or the forceful reconversion of women, in the example given by Abdul above. It is also necessary to remember that the violence caused by othering does not play out only on the bodies of women. Often, men from lowered caste/religious minority backgrounds bear the brunt of this violence, as it is men who occupy public/work space.

The process of othering also takes place through a spatial and sensory occupation. For example, Roop who lives and works in the old city of Hyderabad, which has a high density of Muslim population, shares in her writing: *A few days ago, my younger brother along with his friends went to Charminar (Hyderabad). They said they went to an area where people from the minority religion live. They intentionally sang songs and hymns, evoking the superiority of gods from our religion while walking through the area. On hearing this, my sister exclaimed, 'What fun! You showed them their place.' I felt very uncomfortable hearing this. I felt because my brother is from a dominant religion, he was showing his power by singing these songs. Maybe it is a way to regain power because we belong to the Valmiki Caste. There are many songs that are also targeted at our (caste)community. For example, I remember a song where the lyrics*

were, 'If you dare touch the temple, we will show you your place. We all know who your father is. Today the butcher will slit the neck of your mother cow (Agar chua mandir toh tujhe dikha denge hum, tujhko teri aukat bata denge. Baap toh baap rahega, aaj teri gau mata ki woh naad (gala) kasai katega).' This was a song meant for people like us, from a lowered caste community.

Roop's account is a complex interplay of power and vulnerability. On account of being from a lowered caste community, her brother possibly faces daily discrimination and violence, a form of public 'emasculation' that has also been discussed in the context of lowered caste communities in the chapter on honour/pride. It is possible that he sings the derogatory songs as a way of reclaiming his masculinity - a masculinity that bases itself on power, domination, and instilling fear in others. Even though his material reality remains the same, perhaps due to his caste identity, Roop's brother draws strength from his religious identity, which allows him to belong to a larger majoritarian community that discriminates against others. As Roop's sister says, '*You showed them their place*' signalling the thought process behind who 'belongs' and who must be excluded. From Roop's writings, we can see how vulnerability experienced due to one identity, might be compensated for by seeking belonging within another identity. Two different kinds of masculinity – hegemonic and subordinate – present themselves within the body at the same time.

However, domination does not take place only through physical violence. It begins to seep into everyday life, in subtle and explicit ways. For example, Abdul shares: *In these areas (western Gujarat), which are largely tribal, there has not been a history of celebrating the dominant religious festivals. The community had its own local festivals and rituals. But now every month, there is a huge procession or a celebration, which is not connected to the cultural roots of the indigenous communities in this belt. They forcefully close shops, use loud speakers, and shut down streets during these processions. There is a prevailing atmosphere of fear. If you don't succumb, then you will be targeted. It also makes it difficult for us to participate because everyone stares at us, because as men from a minority religion, we obviously don't belong to these processions.*

Loudspeakers, occupation of public space, the restrictions on livelihood - all of these practices are indicative of consolidating dominance. There is a normalcy with which all of the public spaces are occupied and unapologetically so, that one starts to see some rituals as 'natural', and others as 'foreign'. This means that when one exerts one's own identity or cultural practices within the public space, it comes with a healthy helping of fear and a feeling of being constantly watched. In many ways, what Abdul is describing is also a systematic and deliberate denial of other kinds of

cultural and religious practices that don't conform to a politically dominant imagination, in this case of tribal customs and rituals. If you are marked as the 'other' it makes you an easy target for discrimination and violence. As Abdul points out, this difference is so *palpable* that even when they try to participate, there is a constant fear of not fitting in or of not belonging.

The atmosphere is tense and precarious, resulting in a sense of alienation and vulnerability that makes people/communities feel as though:

1. they have to constantly prove that they belong
2. the sinking feeling that regardless of these gestures, they do not fundamentally have a place of their own within the larger society.

The constrained choices in which they operate are simple: conform or be a target.

What Abdul and Roop's examples also puncture is the assumption that men always occupy a dominant position. As we saw earlier, through other identities – especially caste and gender, social difference marks the bodies of men, and in many cases, renders them vulnerable as targets of

violence. A man from a minority caste or religious community is unlikely to be able to assert or lay claim to the dominant masculinity exercised by men from dominant castes in spaces where he is feeling already alienated. It is also possible that men from lowered caste communities find themselves in an inferior position to women from dominant caste/religious communities in certain social, cultural, and physical spaces. Thus, following in the footsteps of Black/Dalit feminists who have advocated for intersectionality, we see how identities such as caste and religion interact with gender, in producing different kinds of power and vulnerability.

Similarly, Roop shares: *We belong to the manual scavenging caste and people associate all kinds of stereotypes with us. Like how we eat pork, do black magic, how because of our filthy work, negative energies possessed us. Black magic sounds negative, but we don't see it as black magic in our community. For the longest time, we weren't allowed inside temples. So, we began to pray to God in different forms, and we assigned different spots in our neighbourhood for prayer. Similarly, since we were never allowed to eat chicken or mutton, we began eating wild pigs. In our community, there is a tradition where a man prays to a Goddess and when she becomes happy with him, he begins to gain a new knowledge or insight about life. He uses this energy to heal other people. It appears as though he is possessed. Now this tradition exists in many religions, where priests are known to be a direct channel of communication with God, and so people visit them for health or family related issues. But when it is done in our community, it is looked at as black magic, and seen in a negative light.*

I used to regularly meet a friend of mine who is from another religion near Charminar or Mecca Masjid. I had never told him about my caste, because I was afraid he would break his relationship with me. But one day I told him. He immediately asked if I was of the caste that did black magic. I said yes, people of my caste do that work. He then shrugged and said it didn't matter, but slowly, we began speaking less. Similarly, if anyone from another neighbourhood sees a girl walking around with open hair, they will begin whispering and pointing, saying she is possessed. Just because a woman is walking with her hair open, does it mean she is possessed? These are just the stereotypes that have become associated with our caste. I don't try to fight it anymore.

Roop's account calls into question the manner in which non-mainstream religious beliefs are stigmatised and therefore, erased from public imagination and public practice. Her experiences also illustrate the ways in which faith, belief and ritual are negated if they don't adhere to the aesthetics of the dominant. Even as we normalise religious practices of dominant castes that occupy a space of sanctity and purity, the others are

relegated into non-religions or superstitions. For example, the derogation embodied in the term 'black magic' suggests that it is not a *pure* form of religion. Gods and Goddesses belonging to Scheduled Caste and Tribe communities are routinely defiled and made to appear as primitive and archaic, as compared to the Gods/Goddesses within Dominant Caste communities. This echoes colonial classifications such as that of the 'Criminal Tribes Act', where certain communities were targeted because their practices were considered 'barbaric'. There has been a long historical trajectory, which continues to date, of not permitting SC/ST communities to participate in the rituals or enter spaces occupied by dominant castes. In the overwhelming atmosphere of hate, one can empathise with Roop's resignation when she says, '*I just don't try [to] fight it anymore*'.

But how do we understand this practice of 'othering', these practices of 'unseeing' and invisibilising as related to masculinity? As mentioned above, we argue that it sets the foundation for a normative/dominant masculinity that draws strength from religious and caste interests. This violence often takes on 'masculine' structures such as mobs, looting, rioting etc., which are most often carried out by men. However, in addition to women, the victims of these 'masculine' structures are also men - those who are forced to participate in violence due to economic vulnerabilities and those who are the victims of this violence, because they belong to a different religious/caste identity.

Hierarchies within the home

While the examples above locate difference/othering in a broader socio-political landscape, we can sense a microcosm of the same within the space of the home. Here, we turn to Rita who shares her experience of growing up in an inter-religious and inter-caste family: *All the rules in the house were set by my father, who was a Hindu from Punjab. My mother is Christian from Mangalore, and I observed how difficult it was for her to follow these rules. Like a forced performance, during Karva Chauth, Diwali, Holi, Navratris. She could never relate to any of these festivals. These rituals were alien to her, but she had to perform them because she was financially dependent on my father. The difference would play out in daily practices at home. Like he would recite prayers to Hindu Gods as a way of communicating that this was the right way to practise religion. He would not eat rice with his hand, or any food cooked in coconut oil. In fact, he would always claim his ways were more cultured, and my mother was made to feel like a savage, for eating idly, fish, rasam etc. The women on my father's side were very masculine and they carried pride and status about how they looked and behaved. They never accepted*

my mother and me, and made us feel like outsiders. My resistance to all of this was to retreat and not participate in their festivals, weddings, or funerals.

Rita's writing reveals a deep sense of fracture within the household. Religious practices and rituals are often sites for people to experience belonging, community, and hope. It is often an important aspect of the self. In Rita's family, we see how her mother is unable to find space for her own beliefs and rituals. It is pertinent that Rita links this back to her mother's financial dependence on her father, which perhaps, forced her to accept his rules. The other aspect that emerges strongly from Rita's notes is how daily rituals like eating, cooking, and praying get slotted within a cultural hierarchy. Rita's father/relatives' festivals and practices get the sanction that majoritarian religions do, while Rita's mother's beliefs are pushed aside. Even the day-to-day rituals of faith are clearly a way to exert specific forms of masculine control.

She goes on to say: *As a child, dealing with my father was the first instance of dominant masculinity. He was strict, particular, and wanted things done his way. For example, he would have rituals and prayers that he would recite to Hindu Gods, which was a way of communicating that this was the right way. Or he would not eat meat or rice with his hand, which created an immediate clash of beliefs for my mother, who is not Hindu and also from the coast. In her family, everyone ate meat, ate with their hands, and prayed to Jesus. It was a massive clash which led to moral policing which extended from me to my mother. I read dominant masculinity also as acting upon prejudice. My father was very open in exhibiting his prejudice to my mother, thereby making me feel that I had to choose between the two, while he always asserted that he was better. There was a strong North-South divide at home, which he asserted by claiming that the North was cultured and we were savages - literally from little gestures of eating food like idli, curd rice, rasam, to choice of oil, to use of mustard seeds, to the thin consistency of curries - it was always wrong, disgusting and intolerable.*

But outside of that, my father was also playing a soft masculinity. Everyone loved him, they considered him pious, generous, and capable of managing difficult situations. His interactions with people outside his class were rich and genuine from the electrician to the plumber to the gardener to all courier boys. He was a simpleton. White Kurta Pyjama, a Reynolds pen, Bata slippers. He was careful with his money and always discouraged us from purchasing anything new. He was my first encounter of masculinity, because I don't think it was just about him being a man, male assigned, it was his way of owning dominance, which was very powerful and fearful for us.

The dailiness of hierarchy embedded within mundane, everyday practices ensures that we are not always clear about the manner in which our identities get coded and communicated via our actions, through our bodies. What we can view from the above example is that we have created 'superior / inferior' from the kinds of food that we eat to the clothes that we wear, and to the specific preferences that we have. Even in the excerpt above, Rita describes how a mere difference in sense, taste, smell, becomes the ground on which cultural superiority is constructed.

This friction continues on, as Rita describes: *I married into an upper caste Brahmin household in Udupi, that negates any other community or belief system. My mother, being a widow and a Christian, often hid her Christian side from my in-laws. Maybe she felt it was inferior. She was closeted about her Christianity. As my resistance, I refused to change my last name, in spite of that being the practice for brides in the caste I married into. During family festivals, predictable stereotypes were at play. Negative comments about religious minorities; the women spending all their time cooking, being submissive and subservient to their husbands, the caste pride, and so on. These stereotypes are strengthened and transferred to the next generations through community functions, marriages, and pujas.* The act of keeping one's identity and beliefs a secret continues for Rita and her mother, as she marries into a dominant caste and religious family. Rita observes how spaces such as cooking/ praying become spaces to consolidate one's identity through gossip, stereotypes, and discrimination.

What is clear from these descriptions is that the reaffirmation of one's identity is often based on the practices of 'othering', whether that is of a religious minority or of women. This practice and belief systems of othering perpetuates a cycle of distrust and dominance that is focused on preserving one's own dignity and prestige at the cost of another. If we think of Roop's brother's described in the excerpt above, he too chooses to compensate for his lack of power as a lowered caste man, by inflicting dominance through his religious identity. So, whether we are from a dominant caste or not, the processes might be similar, although the stakes are clearly not.

For example, when there is a systematic way in which othering happens for those not in power, a process of invisibilisation also starts to take place, especially around conversations of violence and abuse. For example, Ruby shares: *I want to share the story behind my name. When I was born, I was initially called Salma. I always felt my family was complete the way it was, but my parents and my aunt wanted a male child. My extended family was also putting pressure on my parents to give birth to a male child. One day my aunt suggested that my name be changed because*

it means 'the one who brings good news.' She said it would bring luck to the family in the form of a baby boy. Without asking me how I felt, my name was changed. I was made to feel that my presence wasn't enough, so I began praying to Allah, that a boy is born, so that my family would be complete. One day, the wish was granted and my brother was born. Initially, I was very happy, but as I grew older, I began to realise why every family prefers a male child. Because in our community, they say, only boys can inherit family property. My parents say this is what God has ordained. I wonder, why are there different rules for men and women? And is that what our religion says or is it just society's way of restricting women?

What we can see is that when legitimate or visible forms of authority are available to those in power, then religion inevitably is invoked, as there is often no space for rebuttal or resistance within these spaces. For example, not only is Ruby's identity held hostage in the religious bargaining, she is also silenced, using the figure of God, in whose name discriminatory practices such as unequal property inheritances can be justified.

In both Rita and Ruby's notes, we see how religious/caste differences have to create a particular form of 'othering' – the othering of the real and the present, for something that is ephemeral and simultaneously a subject and object of power. In Rita's experience, this ephemeral presence becomes ground for denying her mother and her, a *legitimate* presence within their own homes. Used in this manner, religion becomes a way of consolidating her father's power within the household, as the primary patriarch. In Ruby's case, we see how religion is used to create differences between men and women, and ensure the subordination of women through the invoking of 'God's will'. It is interesting to note that this imposition is carried out by men and women in Ruby's family, thereby raising the same questions as discussed in Chapter 1, about the ways in which dominant masculinity operates on and through bodies of men and women.

Manufactured by the media

In this final section, we turn to an analysis of the media, and how it produces specific forms of masculinity (and femininity), through the construction of stereotypes, the mediation of difference, and the circulation of propaganda.

Raghu, an avid user of social media, spent much of his research period researching the intersection of caste, class, religion, and gender with and in the media. He shares a Facebook post in Kannada by a male social media user in 2022 that reads: *A mother abandons the beauty of her own body in raising her child. The same son grows up and abandons*

his mother for beauty! Many readers from India will instantly recognise the trope here, since it has been a classic theme in Hindi cinema for decades, at least since the 1980s. The statement which, in fact, is part of a longer and broader discourse on Indian masculinity, sets up a trinity of the mother at the top (the figure of sacrifice), the unfortunate son in between (the betrayer), and the beautiful young woman, the lover at the bottom (the seductress). The antagonism between the man's mother and partner (lover, wife, mistress etc.) has been the central theme of countless television soap operas (beginning with public service broadcaster's serials in the 1980s) and mainstream films, so much so that it has become part of the popular consciousness – teaching us what to expect about family relations, intergenerational relations, gender relations, and also equally importantly, the moral tension (between duty and desire) that goes into constructing the Indian male subject. Readers will notice the pedagogical aspects of this discourse. As with the Facebook post above, when the son abandons the mother, it is a failure of manhood. Other discourses depict the taming of the partner and the obedience of the couple towards their elders – a nod not only to the joint family rather than the nuclear family, but also a nod to the commonly held notions of respect for age, tradition, history itself. The same symbolic network of meanings is extended to the mother as a metaphor for the nation, 'Mother India' while the seductress as a metaphor for a temptation of the Other.

This post on Facebook is a banal example of everyday media practices that are pertinent to our understanding of the way in which the media creates stereotypes and produces difference. While our research focused on Facebook posts and WhatsApp family groups, the wider media landscape is densely populated by discourses of masculinity that traverse across social media platforms, radio, television, peer to peer applications both online and offline, media circulated via small mobile repair shops on SD memory cards and so on. These media discourses (on masculinity, among other discourses) have become such an integral part of our lives that we barely notice as we engage with them through banal everyday media practices. These practices are now very familiar to a very large part of the population cutting across differences of caste, class, and gender. For example, watching television news together at home, clicking a selfie and posting it on Instagram or Facebook, receiving and forwarding a WhatsApp message, watching a YouTube video, tuning into a FM radio station on a radio set or on a mobile phone and so on. Often these media practices have monopolised our leisure time, it has replaced other rituals of communication including interpersonal communication.

Across diverse media practices, we see the same or similar, closely related discourses appear time and again, in different forms and aesthetics across different platforms. We may not be conscious of their similarity, but nonetheless the repetition of these discourses gives them ideological strength. Measuring the extent of their repetition and consistency across media gives us an estimation of their dominance relative to other competing discourses. For example, financiers heavily invest in crime-related content where police officers (mostly men, but also women to a lesser extent) are glorified as honest upholders of the law, deliverers of justice, and in many other ways, exemplifying the ideal Indian male. The urban middle class lifestyle of the nuclear family is heavily sold on commercial television both through advertising and programming. Such discourses have subtle indications of what could be desirable forms of masculinity and femininity for media consumers.

Legacy media

In the traditional media industries (newspapers and magazines, cinema, radio, and television), the conditions and means of production was and is tightly controlled by elites, mostly men from dominant castes who worked as editors, producers, presenters, and so on. The social position of the media creators and financiers plays a huge role in influencing the kinds of discourses produced and circulated in the media. Since men from dominant castes held and continue to hold most of the influential

positions in these industries, it is unsurprising that particular forms of masculinities are key features of media content. Women have always played a subordinate role in media industries, and women from lowered castes and minority religions, even more so. Thus, media discourses, including discourses on masculinity continue to be strongly influenced from a specific social position that resolutely goes against the interests and equality of women, and even more so against women from lowered castes and minority religions. One of our researchers, Suresh, reflects on what he calls the *mass reproduction of stereotyped images of marginalised communities: The only transgender known to Indian movies from 1990s till 2015 were male assigned transgender people. The concept of existence of female assigned transgender people does not even occur in the minds of Indian directors or script writers. This visibility came with heavy ridicule, humiliation, violence, and atrocities. In public, in media, in movies and in many aspects and spaces the male assigned transgender community was a laughing stock for people in the comic scenes. Sometimes when the creativity of the director is high they even make transgender villains. When directors and scriptwriters make transgender villains, they exaggerate in such a manner that the criminality is heightened to unimaginable levels, where transgender people are sometimes shown as cannibals and psychopaths.*

The power of legacy media should not be underestimated given the hype around the rise of social media. To begin with, newspapers, cinema, radio, and television are still accessed by large parts of the population since they do not have either the new kind of digital media literacy or cannot afford access or the infrastructure is weak/absent. Secondly, these media are often consumed collectively (reading and discussing newspapers in groups, watching television together as a family, watching films in theatres) rather than the individualistic use of social media as is the norm in the West. Collective consumption is significant for three interrelated reasons: because there is collective *identification* with the discourses peddled by the mainstream media; because collective consumption is often followed by interpersonal discussion and dialogue that further deepens the impact of the media discourses upon individuals and upon groups; collective consumption and discussion embeds these media practices deeper into community life. Finally, the emotional and affective power of mainstream media works in ways that are distinct from the emotional and affective power of social media. Let us take two examples to illustrate further.

A noticeable pattern has emerged in cinema released in theatres (rather than cinema for OTTs or television). South Indian films, especially in Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil, have delivered large budget smash hits primarily featuring a larger-than-life swashbuckling male hero. Equipped with rippling muscles, this hero not only beats up a wide array of villains, he is also equally at home courting his love and showing his devotion to his mother. Films such as *Bahubali, RRR, Pushpa (Telugu) and K.G.F (Kannada)* are testament to the successful construction of a cinematic masculinity that has reached diverse publics. While Western audiences laud the anti-colonial spirit and the briskly choreographed song and dance sequences of RRR, at home the very same film works to equate the idealised masculine subject with a Hindu god devoted to nationalism; at the same time subordinating Adivasi identity to the caste-hierarchised and mainstream Hindu identity. This kind of affective cinema is thus polysemic, evoking different responses to different audiences reading the film in diverse political contexts.

The film maker Sandeep Reddy Vanga deserves special mention for two of his films, both of which have become a huge hit with young men across the country. These films are *Arjun Reddy* and *Animal*. The former became a smash hit in Telugu and two years later was remade in Hindi as *Kabir Singh* which also became a hit. *Animal* released in 2023, was made in Hindi and was also a huge hit. Sandeep Reddy has openly acknowledged the influence of film makers like Quentin Tarantino who has made a profession of profiting from heavily stylised violence regardless of the plot. Sandeep Reddy, while continuing to draw inspiration from stylisation

of violence, has added another deadly ingredient to the mix - channelising the impotence and anger of the young Indian male who feels rejected and alienated by society. The violence enacted by the protagonists on screen function as catharsis for the men who flock to watch his films. On the surface, the film is careful enough to denounce the protagonist (the film title 'Animal' clearly indicates that the protagonist is sub-human, an animal) all the while enabling audiences to secretly enjoy the violence below the surface.

The success of these films represent a paradox - the enjoyment of consuming the enactment of male violence against women even as the protagonist who represents men, is framed as a victim. Now, regardless of the intentions of filmmakers, it is worth noting that audiences read films against the intended reading of that film. Unpredictable readings at the margins are possible, such as Suresh's reading of a popular nationalist sports film called Chak De India: *Chak De India was one of those first movies which marked the beginning of sports movies on ciswomen. I remember how Chak De India was an experience of feeling power. I just could not just get past Komal Chouthala (Chitrashi Rawat). She, for me, was my young age when I had joined cricket. This character was exactly developed according to how we all started expressing masculinity in our young age when our families would keep regulating gender. The reason for short hair, the reason for track pants and shirts, to break curfew timings fixed for women, taking freedom with body language, making friendships beyond social understanding and finally a field which leads us and gives us an identity of confidence are all brought beautifully in this character just like our life experience. In the movie when she says that it is unnecessary to wear a sari in the scene of the party before the final match, my heart jumped out of joy for that statement.*

From Suresh's notes we can see different registers of identification that are articulated in powerful terms. The most basic register of identification is to see oneself *reflected* in the character shown on screen. When Suresh says, 'the character was exactly developed...just like our life experience', notice how broad the domain of identification is, covering hair, clothing, friendships, family behaviours.

Another register is his 'heart jumping with joy', a different register of identification because the character on screen resolves conflicts in precisely the way that the viewer is unable to do so in reality. A third register of identification is the experience of 'feeling power'. This comes from not only the arc of the personality as it evolves in the course of a film but also the sense of power that hundreds of thousands of people are watching this character in a very public sense, it gives the viewer a sense that their own secret that is tearing them from the inside has now

come out in the light of the open. That they can enjoy the publicity of this secret without facing the consequences themselves. They can watch how the discourse about queerness and gender norms triggered by the film unfolds in everyday conversations.

Suresh's memories of Chak De India vividly illustrate the affective power of cinema, and this power cuts both ways, perpetuating and subverting masculinities. We can well imagine the deluge of films, television serials, advertisements, web series that relentlessly expose us to specific ways of being men and women and by implication, advocate a specific kind of society as the ideal. We cannot assume that these media discourses have equal or similar impact or effect on all audiences alike. Media audiences are tremendously heterogeneous in terms of their social identities (caste, class, religion, education, language etc.). They are also heterogeneous in terms of their life background and experiences. These differences not only shape the extent to which they can even access media discourses, but they also influence how they engage with these discourses. For example, a film by Pa Ranjith showing the pride of a Dalit male boxer can produce varying, even opposing reactions in audiences from different caste backgrounds.

The broken promise of user generated content

Till 2010, mobile telecommunications had limited penetration in India, but in the last two decades, internet penetration and access to digital social media platforms has increased dramatically. For example, today WhatsApp alone has more than 500 million unique users in India. With increased access to infrastructure and reduced price of smartphones, we see a wider diversity of discourses (including counter-discourses of advocating for affirmative action, caste census, feminism, intersectional discourses, and so on) with user generated content. While digital platforms have been relatively democratised through user generated content generation, thereby freeing the mediascape from the bottleneck of elite media creators and financiers, it should be noted that these platforms present their own challenges too. While each user can generate content voluntarily with no overt censorship and relatively low or negligible capital and operational expenses, not all content is treated as equal in the eyes of the platform (which manifests in the design of their algorithms and other automated tools to operationalise the platform at scale). Users with more likes, more subscribers, more followers, more reactions, more replies, more retweets and more shares are given preferential treatment than users with less shares. The former are the minority while the latter are the majority. Further, this logic ensures that users with offline capital (either economic or cultural or some other kind of capital) can convert it to capital on the platform (either through acquired cultural capital – a celebrity or an influencer, or economic capital – monetization through advertisements, sponsored posts, and so on). Offline capital and platform capital thus continuously feed on each other.

Thus it is no surprise that on digital platforms too, in spite of the rhetoric of democratising media, it is the dominant caste and class men who are most visible and exert most power in the world of user generated content. Rather than realising the potential of digital networks to dismantle historically acquired dominance and power, these platforms reproduce, and, in fact, exacerbate dominance and power as it exists in other aspects of society.

One prominent way in which online or mediated masculinity expresses itself is towards non-Men – the Other (hetero-normative women, queer women, trans-men, trans-women and so on) who whilst standing outside masculinity, constitute it. Women who feature prominently in the media are often targeted with abuse, doxxing, intimidation with threats, defamation and so on. For instance, in Karnataka in 2022-23, the film-maker and artist Leena Manimekalai has faced a lot of such online hate after her recent artwork that depicted the goddess Kali in a modern avatar

smoking a cigarette. Physical violence is often recorded and recirculated thereby exacerbating the violence against women and sexual minority communities.

Religion, caste, class and ideological affiliation intersect with masculinity in predictable ways. Therefore, we can reasonably infer which kind of social positions (working class, women, lowered castes, Adivasis, minority religions, queer groups, and so on) will be targeted the most and which kind of social positions will most likely be perpetrators (dominant caste and class, heteronormative men, and so on). Platforms also become sites of other facets of masculinity such as prescribing normative behaviour for male bonding through ideas of brotherhood and solidarity, often through ridiculing or excluding the other. For example, YouTube has thousands of hours of videos where young Gujjar and Meena men in Rajasthan and Haryana taunt each other with short poetic but abusive songs or recitations. Such videos are not only testimony to the male bonding between men from the same caste, but it is also at the same time, an instance of one caste berating the other.

Masculinity on Facebook and WhatsApp

In one of our meetings, Raghu shared another post from Facebook:

Public Post: Many women are committing immoral relationships. Outside their marriage. With men from minority religions.

Comments: A woman who has an immoral relationship should be put to rest. These sluts should be ashamed of their dignity.

Comments: Men have to bring money home, pay the electricity bill, house rent. Women just go about as they please. Many women go out with men from minority religions because they have money.

Comments: This is a ploy to increase their population. Keep your daughters at home.

Comments: This type of prostitution should be curbed immediately. Women should be punished in a cruel manner. If she is left unpunished, she will harm our society and our religious traditions.

The post contains content which is popularly used to target both women, and members of religious minorities. The subtext is the insecurity and anxiety over sexual relationships that fall outside the ambit of marriage, and worse, outside the boundaries of caste and religion. The stereotype is useful in portraying women as immoral, money-minded and pleasure seeking, and men from minority religions as sexually excessive, dangerous, and shrewd (in trying to increase

their population). The resulting conclusion, as in most cases, is to curtail the autonomy of the woman, and ensure she is punished, such that she knows her place within society. In these spaces, the norms of honour and respectability are again inscribed upon women's bodies as foundational characteristics of *femininity,* and how it becomes her duty to uphold the pride of a community.

Raghu shares another example, this time from a group called 'Brahmins Worldwide': *I see many Brahmins here are not clear on what 'Gotra' is and what its significance is in Sanatan Hindu culture. I hope this small explanation will however clear their basic doubts. The Gotra is a system which associates a person with his most ancient or root ancestor in an unbroken male lineage. For instance, if a person says that he belongs to the Vashistha Gotra then it means that he traces back his male ancestry to the ancient Rishi Vashishtha. So, Gotra refers to the Root Person in a person's male lineage. We may think that the Gotra system is a little biased as it focuses mainly on male lineages. However, there's a little science behind it: Y Chromosome is the only Chromosome which gets passed down only between the men in a lineage. Women never get this Y Chromosome in their body. And hence, Y Chromosome plays a crucial role in modern genetics in identifying the Genealogy i.e. male ancestry of a person. And the Gotra system was designed to track down the root Y Chromosome of a person quite easily. This also makes it clear why females are said to belong to the Gotra of their husbands after marriage. That is because women do not carry Y Chromosomes, and their sons will carry the Y Chromosome of the father and hence, the Gotra of a woman is said to be that of her husband after marriage.*

Here, we observe how patriarchal caste-based practices (that of tracing lineage through male ancestry) is legitimised through the seemingly incompatible vocabularies of tradition and science. Religious sanction (within Sanatan Hindu culture) and 'scientific analysis' of X & Y chromosomes are used to accord women an inferior place within society, where her identity is reduced to that of her husband or her father. It is interesting to note how comfortably tradition and science sit together, when it becomes a matter of consolidating caste/religious dominance.

A final example, from a Facebook post titled *'Benefits of make up for women'*

Kaalungura: Many diseases can be controlled by wearing toe rings. It helps women to have regular menstrual activity and control abdominal pain at that time.

Forehead Tika: It regulates body temperature. It signifies the spiritual strength, emotional and physical union of males and females.

Nose: Pierce the left nostril of the nose. The nerves here directly touch the uterus. Reduces cramps during menstruation

Mangalsutra: Married women wear the Mars formula which keeps the body's blood pressure under control. Prevents heart disease.

Sindoor: Mercury in Sindoor regulates the nerve pressure of a woman's cerebellum.

Bindi: The headache disappears almost immediately. The nerves in the area where the bindi is tranquilised, the headache disappears.

A female Facebook user posts a detailed commentary on scientific reasons behind ornaments that women wear. She goes on to explain that 'many diseases can be controlled by wearing a toe-ring. It helps women to have regular menstrual activity and control abdominal pain during menstruation' or that 'married women wear the *mangalsutra* which keeps the body's blood pressure under control and prevents heart disease' or that 'the mercury present in the Sindoor regulates the nerve pressure of a woman's cerebellum'. The discourse is towards persuading Hindu women to continue displaying markers of her Hindu womanhood, but it legitimises

tradition in the name of medical-scientific language of blood and nerve pressure, menstrual activity, and cerebellum. More subtly, the discourse appears to be for the benefit of a woman by coinciding her physical well-being with traditional markers of Hindu womanhood. A lot of male users have commented on this post appreciating this wisdom. Part of the appeal for men stems from the acknowledgement of a shared religious (supposedly glorious) past that anticipated what science is learning only today. This is where ideology of discourse comes in. The joy derived from the legitimisation of the glorious past conceals the legitimisation of control over women's bodies.

As we can see from the examples above, masculinity intersects with religious identity which in turn often intersects with caste and gender identity. Much of the Facebook posts we analysed contained references to religious discrimination wherein the person posting, and the commenters frequently made connections between masculinity and ability to act or take action. Violence was encouraged upon women, queer communities, religious minority communities, lowered caste communities, and so on by asserting that men must act when everyone else (media, courts, government) are silent on some issues. Vigilantes who take law and order in their own hands are admired and celebrated on social media as 'real men'. On the other hand, those male social media users who uphold values of secularism, or defend queer communities are often ridiculed as not being man enough or are called as eunuchs and so on. Women who dare to post dissenting views are instantly abused, dehumanising them as sexual objects.

The family Whatsapp group

We studied content being posted on two family WhatsApp groups (one of the researchers took one group consisting of relatives on mother's side and another group on his father's side) to understand how the caste-class position and background influences the ways in which men (and women) engage with misinformation and hate; and embody and practice notions of masculinity and femininity online. Both these groups consisted mostly of Gauda Saraswat Brahmins (henceforth, GSBs), a dominant caste of coastal Karnataka that has enjoyed social power for centuries and political power for many decades. The GSB community has family deities enshrined in temples located in South Goa, and they are spread across the western coast. Although the majority of this community is socially dominant and economically well-off, there is a deep-rooted mythology of persecution and victimhood in the GSBs. This is partially rooted in history

when there were mass conversions of GSBs to Christianity (Catholic) under Portuguese rule of Goa from the mid-16th century onwards. In reality, many GSBs converted to Christianity as a way of upward social and economic mobility and even amongst the GSBs who did convert, caste-based discrimination remains intact amongst Goan Catholicism, where the Brahmin-Christians discriminate against lowered castes who have converted to Christianity.

The GSBs have been a powerful caste in the coastal part of Karnataka but they are a tiny part of the population. They are, in fact, surrounded by a host of lower and economically backward castes such as Billavas, Bunts, Mogaweeras (Billavas alone comprise 18% of the population of coastal Karnataka, while Bunts comprise 12-14% of the population). Beary Muslims and Catholic Christians are the other major demographic blocs. Unlike other parts of India, these religious minorities and lowered caste groups are *not* living in absolute poverty due to two long-term phenomena: the land reforms and reservations inaugurated by the Devaraj Urs led Congress government in the 1970s, and secondly large-scale immigration of both men and women (across all classes, castes and religions) to the Gulf countries and continuing infusion of capital in coastal Karnataka from the remittances of these immigrants. Although individually, each of these caste-religious blocs are not the majority, taken together they represent a significant threat to the Brahmin hegemony of the region. This background is important to understand when explaining how certain discourses are readily accepted in the WhatsApp groups of this community.

On the face of it, these groups are designated as 'family' groups, formally set up so that family members spread across different places, countries even, can stay in touch – mostly on family matters. Bulk of the messages on these groups can be classified into three broad categories – wishes (from good morning to birthdays, anniversaries, or other family functions); religious ceremonies (i.e., ceremonies taking place within the family or major religious ceremonies that take place in the public domain, such as videos of worship at the Tirupati temple, Ayodhya temple, or Puri temple); mainstream entertainment (funny clips circulating across social media apps, exhibitions of talent, especially by women and children circulating on social media and mainstream commercial television shows etc.). Bulk of the messaging are forwards or uploads of videos. There are very few messages where individuals type text – likely because most individuals in these groups are not familiar with typing on the phone and/or not familiar with typing Kannada using the roman alphabet available on the smartphone. Almost all of the active users on the groups are middle-aged or senior citizens. Younger family members are part of these groups, but

they remain silent. Many of the younger members, especially those living in cities or living abroad, have put the group on 'mute' indicating that they tolerate membership in the group out of respect and deference of their family, but in practice, completely ignore the flow of information circulating on this group. Most of the messages (even the forwards) are initiated by men, while most of the women restrict their activity to simple 'emoticons' such as the laughing emoji, the thank you emoji, and so on. Men initiate and women react. The offline dynamic of women's deference to men, the young deferring to the old is reflected in the dynamics of the WhatsApp groups.

A recurring theme in the entertainment category is jokes and humour that belittle women or present men as victims of women's behaviour. It is usually men who post these messages as instances of 'tongue-in-cheek' humour. Mostly, men react to these messages while women choose to remain silent. This tongue-in-cheek humour plays on sexist and misogynist heteronormative stereotypes – women obsessed with shopping, taking more time to get ready than men, ordering men around, women as liars, neurotics, over-emotional, hysterical, and so on. Such stereotypical discourses are readily available on a wide range of mainstream television shows – such as Kapil Sharma Comedy Show, or regional versions of this

show on Marathi and Kannada television channels. Many popular Facebook and Instagram pages, groups and accounts also post such content. Such content soon makes its way to WhatsApp and subsequently is shared on various groups. The bulk of the banal exchange on these WhatsApp groups can be called to function according to a supposedly benign patriarchy of the father (the father being the eldest male in the family). It is repeatedly insinuated both online and offline (usually through humour) that women have all the agency and control while men are easily bullied and manipulated by women.

In reality, women are strictly controlled in terms of families choosing their partners, restricting career choices (if at all they are allowed to work and travel), appropriateness of clothing, freedom to communicate both online and offline, division of labour in the household (women cook, clean, birth and care for children while men bring the income and take all the important decisions both inside and outside the house). Many women publicly defer to this masculinity (which dominates in reality but creates the discourse of male victimhood) – by performing their symbolic agency but deferring to men. In private, usually when only women are gathered, they do complain about the men, but it is done in whispers and no action is ever taken. Injustices are silently suffered by the women while masculinity goes unchecked, even encouraged and celebrated, especially amongst male children. However, it should be noted that women too are political only to the extent that they are aware of their own performativity, their own oppression but almost always explain it away to their bad luck, fate or just the way life is supposed to be. Simultaneously, their solidarity almost never extends to women from other castes, religions, cultures etc. They are as rabid in their support for majoritarian religious nationalism as their male counterparts. Independent political thinking is largely absent and nor is it encouraged in these families. There is no mention, much less discussion about queerness or caste. The invisibilisation of these realities is an indicator of the absolute dominance of Brahmanical heteronormative culture. It is simply taken for granted, invisible and as natural as clock time that regulates daily life. It is not registered as something explicit and constructed but becomes the background fabric on which all social life is woven.

A small but noticeable category of information is political – almost always labelled as 'forwarded many times'. These are videos that are favourable to the ruling party and usually glorify the masculinity of the prime minister. These video clips almost always have a consistent trinity of associations - the ruling political party, majoritarian religious identity and nationalism. This trinity of associations are anchored to a specific positive

set of meanings that are commonly recognised through keywords, for instance the discourse of Vishwa Guru (global leader) refers to the global respect and pride for both India and the current prime minister. Pride, bravado or bravery, wisdom, cunning, honesty and transparency are all common discourses that are associated with this trinity of party, religion, and nation. The other side of political information is usually contempt, dismissal or plain disinformation about opposition parties, opposition leaders, religious minorities, welfare schemes aimed at the poor. Some of the disinformation paradoxically endows opposition with such guile and hypocrisy that the ruling party is depicted as a helpless victim surrounded by villains on all sides. There are a few individuals who are decidedly more radical in their political views, regularly posting hate speech, or speech that directly incites violence against minority communities. Such forwards have endorsements from a few other family members but met with silence from others. Once or twice, the elder most family members have taken it upon themselves to chide their younger relatives who post such hate speech, following which such messages have reduced but not completely stopped. This hate speech too is 'forwarded many times', and it is likely that these individuals are part of other radicalised WhatsApp groups, and they spend considerable time just taking content from one group and posting it on the other (cross-posting). Cutting across men and women in these groups, there is a political masculinity on display, closely indexed to religious nationalism and majoritarianism. This takes the form of on the one hand valorizing the leaders of their own ideology and religion while on the other hand degrading, mocking, or abusing those with other ideologies and social identities. Clearly the dominant caste status that these communities have enjoyed inform their readiness to think of themselves as victims of historical injustice, victims of various conspiracy theories, and suspicious of outsiders. Any (real or perceived) threat to their dominance evokes a strong reaction. Since most of them are unable to directly act on their feelings, these WhatsApp groups become a cathartic space where they can freely express what they really think and feel, without the sanctions and bounds of polite society where they are forced to perform basic tolerance for others.

In conclusion, even a snapshot of media practices from Facebook and WhatsApp provide ample evidence that media and communication systems (mainstream television, social media including peer to peer apps) are major sites for extending offline masculinity and in the process of mediation, producing new forms of masculinity much of which is toxic and harmful to social life.

Negotiating difference

How do we make sense of these forms of violence that are exerted through forms of stereotyping and discrimination? Our foundational understanding of gender begins with difference. Whether we are focused on traditional discourses or feminist discourses, difference is the foundational basis for discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice. This normative understanding continually shapes our societies, and is reflected in work force participation of women, early marriage, restricted mobility for women and so on. Despite monumental contributions from sexuality movements and the work of trans scholars who argue against biological determinism, in patriarchal societies, gender difference is still a fundamental marker of social organisation, leading to exclusion, discrimination, various forms of inequalities and violence.

In the excerpts above, we draw attention to other kinds of differences that intersect with gender - caste, class, and religion. Again, we sense how we are unable to accept difference, without creating a hierarchy, without constructing the 'other'. In short, we are only able to identify ourselves by identifying what we are *not*, and further, by distancing ourselves or legitimising violence on the basis of this perceived difference. We

can sense how power and vulnerability shift according to context and situation, but how the eventual targets of this 'dominance' are women, and men from lower caste/minority religion communities. In some specific ways, we see how certain forms of masculinity are valourised and other forms are criminalised. For example, the way in which social media peddle rumours about the 'masculinity' of minority religion men, as overtly sexual/cunning, has to be seen as a way for their bodies to be threatening to the women of majority religion communities.

However, the concept of 'difference' has also enabled communities to challenge universalisms. For example, the Dalit feminist movement has argued for the need to acknowledge the difference between their experiences and the experiences of dominant caste women. Black feminists have argued for the same in their fight against white supremacy, asserting the need for an intersectional approach to feminism. Thus, for those who desire homogeneity, difference can be a cause for violence; for those on the receiving end of violence, difference can become a ground for assertion and self-representation. Similarly, any study of masculinity requires us to acknowledge difference in power, while simultaneously questioning difference as a basis for violence.

Otherwise, we run the risk of perpetuating the same stereotypes - for example, by only researching/working with marginalised communities, without questioning the forms of masculinity that emerge from dominant caste/religious communities, we perpetuate a specific form of difference. Further, we must engage more deeply with the ways in which marginalised communities interact and subvert dominant masculinity, whether through participation, coercion or resistance, in order to engage more deeply with the ways in which masculinity is constructed, across contexts.

Finally, following in the footsteps of Sharmila Rege and other anti-caste scholars, we must not get complacent with the fact of difference. To think of difference as a hard and rigid line, makes it impossible to think of cross caste, religious, class solidarities. In other words, the problems of the oppressed remain only their problems. Rather, it is necessary to be alert to differences in order to find ways to challenge power structures to cover the distance between our social locations.

By Ram Bhat

In the previous sections, we have understood the diverse ways of 'being male', that is not confined to only a specific form of an individual, or even a specific form of community. Instead, what we have been focused on are the multiplicities of masculinity that allow us to explore the various manifestations framed around caste, gender, language, class, ethnicity, language, religion, colour of the skin etc. In short, we have been trying to divest masculinity from its hegemonic form – essentially, the embodiment of maleness associated with the most privileged groups, i.e. from a dominant caste, from the majority religion, from the upper classes, and so on.

However, with masculinity (or femininity) there still remains the question - what does it mean for something to be embodied?

Imagine cricketers involved in a cricket match. The cricketers do not remember the techniques they learned from their coach or from their practice sessions. Deeply involved in the game and often having to take split second decisions - the cricketer plays with what we call 'instinct'. In other words, what we call instinct is nothing, but hundreds and thousands

of hours of structuring oneself that ultimately comes to reside in our very bodies - as accumulated knowledge about something. Habitualised practices within a symbolic structure become part of us to such an extent that it appears as if we act 'spontaneously'. These habitualised practices that operate within certain symbolic structures have become so naturalised that they become invisible over time. When these habitualised practices are regularised and practised at scale, then they, in turn, reaffirm the symbolic structures within which they operate. It is a productive cycle where both symbolic structures and habitualised practices feed into each other. These symbolic structures and habitualised practices come to our attention only when someone deviates from the expected behaviour and attitudes, i.e. when an individual or groups refuse to perform or misperform.

While we may engage with the idea of symbolic structure to understand the implications of masculinity, what does it mean? What does it look like, and how would we know when we see it? An easy example of it would be televised news debates – they are an example of a regularly occurring symbolic structure. The debate symbolises the idea of a 'public sphere' or 'marketplace of ideas' where each participant is deemed to enjoy free speech to express what they think and the audience subsequently decides, on a specific collective imagination - symbolising the formation of 'public opinion'. Within this symbolic structure, we can see various rules and norms that are generated by this structure. The moderator/host/anchor is supposed to play the role of a 'neutral' participant, mediating contradictory views. By its very nature, the views and opinions in a debate are supposed to be antagonistic to each other, therefore, influencing the choice of participants by the television network. Each speaker knows that they are expected to provoke the audience by articulating a distinct and provocatively oppositional view on the topic. Each programme has a time-bound limit and each guest has limited time to speak. At the beginning, the host introduces the programme and frames the context for the debate that is to take place. At the end, the host synthesises the views and summarises the debate for the benefit of the viewers, again framing the context of the debate.

All of these processes, norms, rules, and agreed-upon values are embodied within this framework, and yet, are often invisible to us. It is only in the unravelling of the rituals or process that we are able to glimpse the manner in which the symbolic holds together all of our knowledge systems and ways of being. For this chapter, therefore, we are using the framework of symbolic structures to engage more deeply with the ways that dailyness of experience is supported by a set of norms, rules, and values that are often (made) invisible to us.

The specific events that we most often can pay attention to are - weddings, death anniversaries of relatives, work-related conferences and meetings, training programmes etc., each of which reveal our understanding of the manner in which we behave, the way we are expected to behave, and the 'right' attitude to embody in a given setting. This does not necessarily mean we are all automatons just blindly following these unwritten rules and norms for every setting we find ourselves in. There are often occasions when we want to (without any obvious or apparent reason) rebel against the script, we feel revulsed at the prospect of obedience and conformity. In such cases, individuals and groups are made to experience the social cost of deviation from the norm through a range of tactics - from appeal to one's common sense to bullying and threats, all the way to physical violence including murder, as was evident in the previous chapter. It is rarely easy to go against the tide, and yet, individual behaviour is unpredictable and can often surprise us.

By taking both aspects into consideration – the sedate predictability of human behaviour as well as the startling volatility of the individual – we want to engage with the specific manner in which certain symbolic structures generate expected behaviours, attitudes, and habitualised practices that signify male-ness. To reiterate, the power of these symbolic structures does not *guarantee* that participants will comply, it only means that we are 'invited' to behave, act and feel in a particular way and it is *likely* that we will comply. In other words, life is experienced as more difficult, uncomfortable or awkward or even violent and unpleasant, if we choose not to comply. This chapter allows us a closer look at several symbolic structures in the context of religion and religious identities - wedding, death anniversary, matchmaking and so on. Across these symbolic structures, we see that the field of masculinity is a contested space where individuals often struggle to conform or rebel against the behaviour that is expected of them when performing their role in such structures.

Rules and roles of rituals

Let us begin with a description of Raghu's experience at his grandfather's recent death anniversary, set in rural North Karnataka: *Every year, I go home for my grandfather's death anniversary. Once the rituals are complete, a prayer is offered to the 'linga' and this is followed by a community feast. The first priority is to feed the head priest, followed by feeding male members of the family and friends. After this, the workers sit down to eat, and at the very end, the women of the family. Each year, I try to contain my hunger so that I can eat with the women, but my*

father always forces me to eat with the head priest as I am the 'son' of the family. On my recent return, I observed that this year, the workers belonged to the Dalit caste. They were not invited into the puja, and I observed that my father was making provisions for them to eat outside the house.

It was a particularly hot day, and I didn't feel it was a suitable place for them to eat. I didn't say anything to my family members, but as soon as the workers arrived, I invited them into the house. It was a group of three women, one man and a child. They seemed very confused and hesitant. They didn't know that I was part of the family. My father was already

glaring at me in disapproval, but he dared not say anything in front of my aunt, who stood by my decision. I told my parents that it was too hot for the workers to sit outside and eat. By this time, the head priest had arrived and he stood there observing the situation. The workers got embarrassed and stepped outside the house. Finally, my aunt made the decision to invite them in. On hearing this, the head priest was enraged and left the house. I began to serve the workers the same food we had served the guests before. However, even though my aunt had accepted them inside the house, she refused to let me serve them certain items: like the special peanut powder and ghee.

Notice that in the first part of the notes, Raghu uses the words 'every year', and 'each year' signifying the repetitive nature of the symbolic structure called 'the death anniversary'. It is already clear that with every iteration of this structure, there is an expected sequence of events that all participants are expected to follow - beginning with rituals, prayer, offering to the 'linga', community feast which itself is sequenced to begin with the head priest eating, followed by the family which, in turn, is sequenced with all men eating first followed by workers and the women eating last (presumably since the women are expected to serve the rest and eat last). Now one could ask, why is this sequence the correct one and why not any other sequence? Why not food be kept at one place and everyone eats together? Why not eat first and pray later? It does not occur to participants to ask these kinds of questions. It feels 'natural', or the 'way of doing things', because participants have internalised that this is the way it has 'always' been practised. Notice that Raghu says 'this year, the workers were Dalits', indicating that it is unusual that Dalit workers were present at the ceremony. Therefore, it would also have been unusual that these workers were 'not invited' to the puja; instead, his father made arrangements for them to eat outside. The symbolic structures of the ceremony (death anniversary) combine with the house itself as a symbolic structure, with a dividing line of inside and outside the house. Dalits eat 'outside' while the rest eat 'inside'. The boundary of the house may be an arbitrary one, but it is also a very real one not just in the physical sense of a boundary but also how that boundary is exercised by the owners and occupants of the house.

In his notes, it is clear that Raghu understands the behaviour expected of him (especially the role he should play as expected by his father) in these symbolic structures; but he attempts to deviate from these norms. Being a male descendant of a family (a son) assumes significance in the context of the death anniversary of a male ancestor. He is expected to follow in his father's footsteps as his successor, establishing a direct lineage from the grandfather to the grandson. The women, the other guests, the workers

here are merely onlookers, the centre-stage is occupied by the father and son in contact with the soul of the grandfather with the head priest as the mediator between this world and the one beyond it. In this symbolic structure, when Rohan breaks the rules and norms, the others who have decided to conform begin to establish their authority. The father only glares in disapproval while the head priest leaves the house in anger. His aunt withholds special foods from the workers. We can see how Rohan's aunt behaves differently from the other men in this drama – his father or from the priest. She is not a male, but nonetheless she is imitating the logic that men display, even while her being a woman enables her to negotiate and bend the symbolic structure of the caste system that would ordinarily compel her to keep the workers outside the house.

However, her withholding the special foods from the workers indicates her own symbolic boundaries of what she will transgress and what she will not. The lines that are drawn in her head are not visible to anyone, except in the form of action. The symbolic difference between her and the workers she withholds the special food from is only in the manner of how her body is also used to serve the hegemonic framework in which she operates – which demotes her role (i.e. Lingayat, classified as OBC in Karnataka) along with those of the Dalit workers whom she chooses not to serve. The body of the aunt, therefore, is a good example of the ways in which caste and masculinity intersect, not necessarily always on the bodies of men, but also through the bodies of women.

This is also showcased through another story of death, shared by Neelam, from Uttar Pradesh: *A few days after my grandfather died, a group of women from my village held my grandmother's hands and took her to the well, where they broke her bangles. I was standing and watching from a distance. As her bangles were breaking, my grandmother was crying and her entire body was shaking. It was the last day for my grandmother to be wearing vermillion on her forehead, bangles on her wrist, and anklets on her feet. In our community, there is a custom that whenever a married woman's husband passes away, that woman has to break her bangles on the side of a well. I despise this custom and don't understand why this is done to women.*

It was a group of women who took the grandmother to the well and broke her bangles. It is done by and to women to mark the death of the man, and to mark the demotion of the (surplus) woman from the caste community – to indicate that she is no longer available for very visible reproductive roles; or rather her reproductive role will be systematically erased, even as she continues to provide care work and other socially reproductive functions. What was particularly traumatising to Neelam was that even an old grandmother is not spared from being marked in this way. We may

easily vilify women who cooperate in such rituals that curtail their own individuality, expression, freedom and dignity, when we begin to see the deeply symbolic ways in which customs present themselves as eternal or natural.

Any questioning about them, around them, of them, becomes unthinkable. And yet, precisely because they are a product of symbolic interactions; it is equally possible that women or men need not succumb to the force of custom generated by rituals, but could also choose to subvert what is expected of them as this incident Raghu from North Karnataka illustrates: *When my grandfather died, as per custom, only men were allowed to go to the burial ground. But my aunt argued with everyone saying that when my grandfather was alive, it was the women in the family that took care of him. Why is it that we cannot say our final goodbyes? The entire village turned up at my house to convince her, but my aunt refused to back down. Even my uncle couldn't say anything. Finally, she made all the women go to the burial ground, including my sister. While they were about to bury the body, all the male family members put in a fist full of mud. But my aunt brought all the women together, and made sure everyone put a fistful of mud on the body. Everyone was amazed at how she overcame the men in the village. I was also amazed. Often, I hear my father talking about anti-caste and anti-ritual politics, but when it comes down to it, they never oppose it. My aunt never talks about it, but when it happens, she always does what she believes is fair and right.*

Women going to the burial ground, putting a fist of mud over the deceased - these may seem like banal activities. But within a Lingayat community, these seemingly mundane acts are highly controversial because they are so gendered and expected only from male relatives. Within a particular family situation, given some specific interpersonal relations, individuals may find themselves in a position to exercise their agency and will. But it is not always possible to predict the manner in which these moments of subversion, resistance, and negotiation present themselves – especially, given such moments extract a tremendous psychological and financial cost upon those involved.

The weight of marriage

Let us take another common symbolic structure, a dominant caste Hindu heterosexual marriage. Mausam shares a memory related to her sister's wedding: *During my sister's wedding, my family was often made to feel like the girl's side. Dowry is very common in our community, but nowadays nobody calls it by that name. Instead, it will be known as 'gifts'. My parents were told by the boy's family that they don't want much, just*

to ensure that the wedding is of a certain standard. At some point, the boy's family demanded that a big amount be given as part of the rituals. In our community, everyone gives cash in 'Lifafas' like blessings or gifts. I remember my father's worry because the boy's family had asked for a very big amount. My uncle was home during that time, and he told my father that no matter what happens, he will have to give the amount as it is a matter of pride now. I have never seen my father so helpless before. He's never even taken a loan. However, he kept saying he had to fulfil this demand to save our family's honour. Of course, the money was arranged, and the ritual was completed with a smile on everyone's face.

In this story, where do we find the spaces of masculinity and femininity? What are the spaces in which they insert themselves into the story? An interesting point of entry is the framing of 'the girls' side' We already know that inequality stemmed within our wedding customs wherein there is a clear demarcation between the boys' side and the girls' side. Whether the practice of dowry is openly acknowledged or not, the practice continues in various subtle forms because of the basic symbolic structure that marks gender differences in religious heterosexual marriage alliances. The girl is essentially a commodity that is transferred from the girl's father to the future husband.

It is another facet of the same dynamics that marks funeral ceremonies as noted above. In all these cases, the underlying emphasis is on maintaining endogamy, and therefore purity of the caste boundary. Now, within this symbolic structure of the wedding, the girl's family is keenly aware of their burden (experienced as 'saving the family's honour') while the boy's family is equally keenly aware of their advantageous position. It is within this situation that our researcher, his father and his uncle all experience a particular kind of masculinity. Our researcher and their father clearly experience helplessness, maybe some humiliation too. The father and his brother are determined at the same time, to save the family's honour. These emotions of shame, humiliation, helplessness, safeguarding honour, personal sacrifice etc. are all intimately tied to an embodied way of being male, and are invoked, asserted, and reaffirmed frequently in symbolic structures, as it was in this case with weddings.

When my sister began receiving marriage proposals, my family usually didn't inform me because they knew I would start asking questions about the rituals. However, I was part of one such meeting. As soon as the boy's side came to our house, being the only male child, I had to offer them water, sugar, and sweets. The family was aware that my sister holds a BSC in Education and works as a teacher, whereas my brother holds a BA, and works in a sugar factory. They asked my sister to enter the room, and made her walk around a little bit. It looked like a creepy fashion show. I was standing on the other side of the room and thinking in my head, 'Shall we ask the boy to walk around a little bit as well?' Later, one of the older men inquired about my sister's ability to read. I was perplexed by what he was asking. My uncle informed them that my sister works as a teacher in the school. Then they asked about her school. They picked up a fourth grade Kannada text book and made her read one of the poems, which obviously, she did well. Again, I muttered under my breath, 'Shall we make him read something?' My mother heard me and got angry and told me to go get something from the market. I was told that in many of these proposal meetings, girls are forced to take tests of virginity and I was standing by in case something happened. I wanted to be the hero who stopped it. Fortunately, they didn't ask for it and left, saying they would call later. As soon as they left, my uncle, the 'middle man' called and told them that we are not interested. Recently, I was remembering this incident with my mother and asking if we were going to do the same if I agreed to marry, as she wished. She said, such questions will be raised. I pressed her to say what kind of questions. She said it's not in her hands and it's the elders of the community who ask these questions. Simply, it is unavoidable.

Notice that in the excerpt shared by Raghu above, the primary protagonists are the brother of the bride-to-be and the groom along with his family - all men. We do not get a glimpse of how the girl felt when she was asked to walk around the room, or asked to read a poem or even her thoughts about (arranged) marriage. Instead, what we see here is the anguished masculinity of the brother, who is experiencing the insults on behalf of his sister. The brother wants to be the 'hero' who saves his sister, but what is the point at which he is prepared to intervene? He is angry at the injustice of his sister walking and reading for the boy's side; yet, he does not intervene. The 'real' test (even in his mind) about the manner in which his sister will be demeaned will be the possibility of the boy's family enquiring or forcing his sister to take a 'virginity test'. Again, we see an anguished masculinity on display, determined to save his sister's 'honour' by preventing any discussion of her sexuality (but not of her personhood when she is on display like *a* 'creepy fashion show'). If the sister's sexuality had come under discussion or question, the brother would feel compelled to step in and prevent it. This is what *'being a man'* would have meant for him - both as a brother, but also in his self-image as a progressive person who thinks tests of virginity are off-limits in matchmaking.

Take a similar situation, but this time from the girl's perspective: *I just don't understand why people are after the girl about marriage proposals, when she's not even ready to get married. How long is this going to go on? My mother didn't say anything directly to me, but I overheard her discussing it with my aunts. I felt really bad. This was possibly one of the biggest decisions of my life, and they were discussing it without talking to me. I should take the decision of yes or no, but in our community, the parents decide what relationships to choose, which to reject. If they like the boy's family then they invite them, without asking the girl if she would like to meet them? When we try to ask questions about this then they say, this is what god prophesied. But actually, our religion doesn't say anything like this. It affirms the right of a woman to make her own choices. But they just appropriate religion for their own needs. Anyway, my mother turned down that marriage proposal, saying that I was still studying, and it was too early for marriage. Given that marriage plays such an important role in our lives, shouldn't boys and girls both be in agreement? I understand that parents try to do their best for us, but they don't respect our choice. At least my parents could have asked me, 'How long do I want to study, when do I want to get married, what are my plans for the future?', shares Ruby.*

We can see that what injures Ruby in the excerpt above is really the loss of her agency. Without considering her opinion, her family is taking decisions on her behalf. Not just any decision, but one that has major implications

for her whole life ahead of her. She is aware that the family legitimises the robbing of her agency through the framework and symbolic structure of religion, specifically the prophecy. Within a family structure, the parents and the wider family clearly have the authority to interpret religion, while the subject (the bride-to-be) is left to rationalise it - parents try to do their best for us. Obviously, there are many complicated factors that go into why a young woman's agency is taken away when it comes to marriage, especially considering the manner in which we consider the social inevitability of marriage. Apart from the obvious patriarchal and masculinist ideas about the woman and her position in society, there are also issues of class. Poorer families often think of marriage as a way of getting security and protection (from sexual assault and harassment) for their daughter after she attains puberty. On one side, there is the intersection of caste, patriarchy, sexism - what if the girl child exercises her own sexuality? She must be tamed. On the other side, there is the helplessness of poverty - what will we do if something happens to her? Within these strictures and structures, men and women of a family will behave in a way that emboldens specific forms of masculinity; through paternalism (a favourite instrument of patriarchy), families are able to systematically deny agency to young women, in the guise of protection and welfare.

More direct forms of protection and support, however, extracts censure, as is evident in the following story: *I am the eldest amongst three sisters. When my family couldn't convince me to get married, they started targeting my younger sister. By then I was living away from home because of work. One day, my father called to say he had fixed the marriage of my younger sister. My sister knew that the boy was a truck driver. She felt she could travel with him to different places if she married him. I never believed in the idea of acting on family pressure to take any personal decision. I went to the village and a day before the engagement, I got my sister with me to my house in the city. And I did not send her back for a month. On the day of the engagement, I got many calls from relatives, cursing, and taunting me. After this incident, peoiple stopped bringing marriage proposals to our house.*

In the excerpt shared by Neelam above, we see the social cost that individuals have to pay when they decide to go against the ingrained logics and norms of symbolic structures. Clearly, she is independent and outside the direct influence of her family because her work affords her that opportunity. However, when she exercised her agency provided by her economic position, not only her but her whole house was affected, 'people stopped bringing proposals'. The 'reputation' of the family was sullied because two girls did not conform to the expectations even by

their own family members. These instances of subversion are relatively rare compared to how often individuals give in or do not have the strength to resist because they realise too late that they have unknowingly given in long ago.

Take this reflection from the perspective of a grandson: *My mother did not want to marry my father, because they have an age gap of nine years. But since both families are Brahmin, my grandfather felt their values and culture would match. My mother was forced into the marriage, because she was also the eldest daughter in the family. My maternal grandmother had a very tough life, and she took out all her frustration on my mother. She used to hit her a lot. My mother was scared of her parents, and never expressed her opinion in front of them. Even after marriage, she never told them about my father's abusive behaviour. My father, on the other hand, has seven siblings and he is the youngest. He has always lived in a joint family. When my mother got married into the house, she was forced to leave her job. She was expected to take care of the family, and the endless guests at home. There was a lot of discrimination about how the daughter-in-law and daughters were treated in the family. For example, the daughters-in- law were expected to wash the clothes of the daughters, even during periods. Sometimes, my mother is harsh with*

me, but I also understand that this is because she was denied any kind of free expression her whole life.

In the excerpt shared by Rohan above, his grandfather decides the fate of his daughter to maintain the furtherance of his Brahmin caste. The daughter, having arrived into a household that she does not want to be in, now has to contend with a husband who continues to target her. Not only the husband but also his family who distinguishes between daughters and daughters-in-law – an internal hierarchy generated by Brahmanical patriarchy. The husband, being the youngest sibling (of seven siblings) is also low on the pecking order within the men of the family, undoubtedly contributing to his personality and behaviour. Finally, the mother taking it out on her son.

From grandfather to grandson, we see how caste and patriarchy structure behaviour that continue to support the 'normalcy' of masculine behaviour, deeming it to be either traditional or inevitable. Because of this symbolic nature of inevitability, both men and women across generations are subject to and subsequently perpetrate violence of different registers against those weaker than them. The behaviour of the men in the family towards the women can be clearly seen as the foundations of masculinity, but so also the behaviour of women with other women or with other men.

Herein, masculinity is not framed around the body of the man exerting power over the woman, but the symbolic violence that is exerted across the intersectionalities of gender (hierarchical order, age, and gender), which is also a defining characteristic of paternal masculinity. For example, when daughters-in-law are supposed to wash the clothes of daughters and not the other way around, the specific forms of power exerted is derived from the same ideas that bestow power to those older than oneself. Facing an almost entirely oppressive family structure (both her own and her in-laws), and her children being the only individuals she can act upon, the only pathways often provided to women are to reproduce it – and so, these paternalistic forms of 'love' and 'care', often extracted as labour are seamlessly passed on as family expectations and behaviour.

In the name of God

Paternalism and patriarchy are not restricted to family alone. Religious institutions also perpetuate paternalistic masculine practices as 'natural' as the story where Rachel shares her experiences with her male colleagues at events organised by the Church indicates: *When I conduct gender sensitivity sessions, the men who are usually the people in power laugh and tell me that if I continue facilitating these sessions, the number of men coming to their religious institution will reduce. They tell me that*

God has ordained that I should look after my husband and children, not waste time preaching faith related issues. I am met with responses like: 'Sessions like this are useless for us. Women are emotional, it is necessary for them to get in touch with their feelings. But for men, these 'psychological' things don't work.' I responded by saying that he needed to understand the extent of his 'male' conditioning. He responded saying that 'God called upon women to be mothers and wives'. I told him I was a widow. He said irrespective, my calling has to be only with regard to motherly roles. So instead of my activism, I should 'visit orphanages, old age homes, and teach my grandchildren about faith because that is what God has willed for me.'

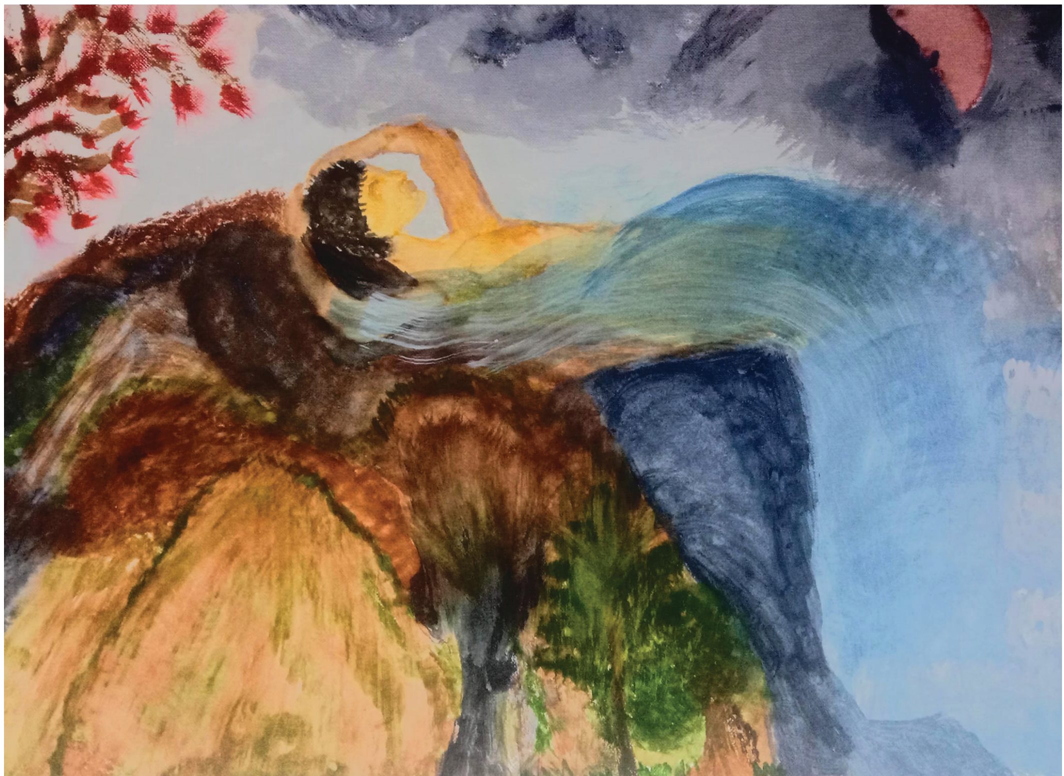
Sometimes during training, if women choose to speak, men either laugh or yawn in between. If someone is sharing her opinion, they will talk down to her. I know men who have gotten up and left during my training. Further, women are actively kept out of decision making. If there is a big conference or event, one or two women will be called onto stage as tokenism. But they have no autonomy to make decisions, even within the departments that are supposedly assigned to them. When I was conducting a session for a group on violence against women and girls, there was a young priest who stood up and said that I was going to break up marriages if I continued discussing these issues so openly. That I should be teaching women to do their duty and not encourage them to cause problems in their family. He went onto blame women for choosing their careers over child care. According to him, the only work women should be doing is accompanying their children to school and bringing them back. On Women's Day, a priest spoke praising his neighbour who had suffered domestic violence everyday, and when we asked why she continued going through it, he said the husband was her 'pati-dev' and if he did not hit her, who would? He went on to say our women have a lot to learn from this woman. On being confronted after a few days by a group of us, he saw nothing wrong in what he said. He continued telling me that marriage holds till death does the couple apart, and as religious institutions, we must do everything to ensure this. He concluded by saying that women need to learn how to compromise, after all, didn't all our Gods suffer?

Not only are patriarchal norms and attitudes remain intact across religious identities, they are *legitimised* in the name of religion, across religion. A Christian priest defending a wife-beater as her 'pati-dev' is indeed a perverse example of religious syncretism. An important part of religious ritual has been assigning specific roles to genders – women as mothers or sisters or wives. Women stepping outside the house are seen as a threat, as a nuisance, as a disturbance to the 'natural' order of things. Organised

religion controlled for the most part by men, has supported the idea that woman represents the 'inside' – home, order, tradition, values while man represents the 'outside' – money and power. The sanction of organised religion, on the other hand, provides men the authority to exert specific patriarchal norms, because of the rationale that God himself has ordained it so. The masculinity on display by men who belong to the symbolic structures of organised religion is brazen, unapologetic, and unsubtle, precisely because they act supposedly with the authority of God behind them – who is almost always seen as masculine (even when embodied within female bodies).

A space of her own

This, however, does not mean that all masculine authority is accepted without question or resistance. In fact, there are every day acts of resistance such as, a mother refusing to marry her daughter because she is still studying, an elder sister bringing her younger sister back to her house in the city to prevent their family from getting her married, or an aunt mobilising women in their family to enter the burial ground and throw a fist of mud on the body of a deceased male in the family, or going



against the family to ask Dalit workers to enter into the house and eat with the rest. These may seem ineffective at the time they were enacted, or even insignificant; but for all participants, these small acts of resistance are an opening, an opportunity to register that these structures that until then seemed so entrenched and powerful are not, after all, undefeatable, not eternal; that the past doesn't have a hold on them, or that the present can be done differently or done away with entirely. These small rebellions have long lasting ripple effects that ultimately transform the symbolic structures or in some instances, completely replace them with something new and more egalitarian. Even in spaces that are religious, there are significant ways in which radical change is possible. For example, millions of people undergo a spiritual experience that is as William James once put it, 'radically discontinuous from all other forms of ordinary consciousness'. These mystical states of being can suspend us from the dullness and routine, even oppressive nature of our everyday experiences and provide a moment for a radical reimagination of our own and others' lives. The theological experience of a greater unity, a transcendental energy, is often accompanied by the dissolution of individual and social identities, and inevitably, to a connection with others that are not mediated through structures of caste and gender. While religious subjectivity can unleash vigilantism and violence based on othering, it is also true that religious subjectivity can at the same time provide solace, dignity, solidarity, and love towards the self and others.

Rachel shares her learnings from a conference she attended where women from the North East, members of the church were invited to speak: *One of the women shared that tribal women in the area where they live, use the term 'Aayaakhoojala' when overwhelmed by pain. It is a term that embodies helplessness and not knowing where to turn, an emotional phrase accompanied by actions of beating one's own breast in extreme suffering. She shared that women face severe forms of abuse, like being slapped, kicked, thrown out of their homes, paraded naked and so on. Thus, these spaces give them the strength to connect with each other, and pray for each other. She shared that they pray to drive out evil spirits, believing that God will deliver them someday. The speaker shared that 'Aayaakhoojala' thus, implies claiming life in fullness as Jesus promised, despite the hopelessness of their situations, and creates a space to mourn the loss of women before them, through a shared sisterhood. However, it is not resigning oneself to helplessness but saying YES to God's promise of a fullness of life, saying NO to closing in on ourselves.*

Outside of church conferences, Rachel shares how women often gather in each other's homes for rosary and prayers. Faced by the oppressive patriarchy of the church, these gatherings give them the opportunity to

comfort and support each other. She shares: *While this could be looked at as resigning to the situation, these spaces also help women name their problems, offer comfort, and pray for each other. For many women, there is no escape from the oppressive situations of domestic violence. Isolation leads to depression and so these small pockets of sisterhood become very crucial.*

Other testimonies reveal the remarkable congruence with which symbolic objects can be used to wrest meaning away from oppression and provide space for solace and peace.

Mausam shares: *While my grandfather had rules for the entire house, the pooja room was run by my grandmother. I have no memory of my grandfather ever entering that room. It was a big, dark room and I was often scolded for trying to go into the room. My grandmother kept all her precious objects in that room. She had a fixed time for praying every morning and evening. She used to spend long hours inside. I feel the room gave my grandmother the freedom to run it as per her rules. Given how strict my grandfather was with the rest of the house, it was the only space under her control.*

If we accept a religion with all our heart, then we receive power from it in the form of faith. In my religion, I feel there is a space of honour for women. For example, it is said that heaven is located beneath the feet of the mother. In another text, it says that any family who raises a daughter and ensures her education, will stand next to God, just like two fingers standing next to each other. It is only in the interpretation of these texts, by men, that women are given an inferior position in society.

Ruby further shares a personal experience which affirmed her belief in God: *Earlier this year, a boy who had been continuously harassing me at college, suddenly came to my house. He met my father and claimed that we both loved each other and if my father doesn't allow us to get married, then he will implicate my father in a false marriage case. And he will spread rumours about me in the neighbourhood, dishonouring my family. My parents got very scared. I remember no one slept that night in my family. I was crying non-stop and praying to God to release me from this demon-like-man to safeguard my honour. A few days later, the same boy and his brother came to the house and apologised to my father. He said he will treat me like a sister from now on. Since this incident, my faith has become stronger in God. I feel if he can take care of everything in the world, then it's a small thing for him to resolve my issues.*

It is difficult to identify or pin down what religion or faith offer, particularly in times of crisis, and yet, these daily rituals appear to provide a means by which the traditional frameworks of institutional religion can be

contested, as Mausam shares from her own experience: *I feel faith is belief, something that works outside logic. Every time I visit the shrine, I read the letters left by women for the saint. The letters are written in a confidential, conversational tone, almost as though one is speaking to a friend or a lover, where I have the space to demand, argue, complain, plead etc. Perhaps this space is missing for women in their family lives. The figure of Krishna within Hinduism is another example. A god who plays, flirts, respects and listens to women, he is always the 'sakhi', a friend for women.*

In fact, the manner in which gods and goddesses embody the masculine and feminine is a prominent part of almost every religion, providing different models of how power could potentially operate, and in whose bodies it could reside.

Roop, who is from the Valmiki community shares: *I feel in our religion, a lot of respect is given to women, because there are many powerful Goddesses. These Goddesses embody different emotional qualities, like Kali is anger, Durga is maternal. The Goddesses express their emotions openly. I get a lot of power from seeing them, I also try to express myself as openly as possible.*

In short, symbolic structures derive their strength from their constant repetition over decades and centuries. The repetition gives strength because it makes the structure constantly available to its adherents over long periods of time, and therefore, increases its chances of intergenerational transmission. However, the same repetition is also a source of anxiety and weakness, because in every repetition, there is always the stressful possibility that participants may not conform, may not obey *this* time. Those participants will expose the arbitrariness of the structure, the hollowness or the flimsiness of its pretensions through which masculinity is used to create a tight rein on all those who participate. All of the experiences articulated in this chapter reveal the systematic and sporadic ways in which women find spaces for themselves and their peers within the symbolic structures afforded by their religion. Some women find that they can carve their own space without men intruding or controlling them. Crucially this space is not for productive labour for the household, but leisure time where she can pray but also rest, think, and recuperate her body and soul. Others find that faith is a productive and satisfying interpretive framework through which emotions like hope can be channelised when good things happen to them. Yet others find a community of women (through their letters to a saint or a companion to Krishna) mediated by God, a community with whom they can share their troubles and hopes, share their despair and laughter. In all these cases, finding a refuge, a shelter from the oppressive structures of patriarchy,

caste in the religious context was possible, precisely because it is the domain of theology itself that offers this possibility of suspension, as well as a dissolution of the self. If there is any hope for men and women to do masculinity differently in the future, if men are not to be written off, then that better future must include space for some kind of spiritual or radical experiences that can continue to engender a radically discontinuous consciousness, a solidarity, a source of strength and refuge, a shelter from the storm.

Conclusion

The process of writing this research study was a slow process of interrogation, reflection, and unlearning of our own assumptions around gender and masculinity. To arrive at a framework for analysis on masculinity we started with ourselves. This required the uncomfortable, often vulnerable process, of dipping into our own memories, of stepping back into experiences where we confronted or conformed to power, or where we ourselves, exerted power on others. The reflection in the mirror was not always pleasant. It is difficult to reckon with our own prejudice and privilege, and it is these questions of power that anyone doing a self-reflexive study of masculinity will invariably have to confront. We (along with the ethnographers who participated in the study) began tracing back our lives, occupying that funny, somewhat uneasy, insider-outsider position that a research process entails. As we shared across diverse social contexts, the very meaning of masculinity was reconfigured through local dialects and language. Personal memories of pain and hurt acquired a different texture when looked at from the lens of community history. Truly working with an acceptance of intersections and difference means recognising that while one might feel powerless/oppressed in one context, one is probably complicit and accountable in another.

In 'writing ourselves in' to the study, we revisited our past, somewhat gingerly, examining incidents in our lives through the 'lens' of masculinity. We wrote about our childhoods, our intimate relationships, our experiences at work, and so on. This process has led us to observe smaller, sensitive aspects of everyday life. Because rarely, do we really sit with bitter sweet experiences with a pen in hand. The masculine feminine frame allowed for many of us to identify and dis-identify in varying degrees, across

time, relationships and environments. We kept our research questions as open as possible, so as to not pre-empt a response or conclusion. In this, the methodology of ethnography was well-suited. Each person's notes were a powerful observation of their daily lives, relationships, incidents, and so on. Yet, somewhere the intent of the study was in the back of all our minds. Perhaps we were searching consciously or unconsciously for the 'masculinity' hidden away in each of our lives, a sort of dark secret inside our cupboards. Try as we did, in the initial days of research, we could not rid ourselves of the lingering notion that masculinity was indeed something negative, violent, and in need of some kind of transformation.

And so we continued, with all the obstacles that emerge from long distance research processes- erratic connectivity, delays, lapses, and perhaps more important, the kind of fatigue and emotional distress that emerges from researching the personal. Our monthly conversations were an important space in this regard, to share our thoughts and feelings and listen to each other, to feel a little less alone. The notes revealed a vast canvas of experiences and emotions that each of us felt described masculinity. Many of the experiences, predictably, spoke of violence, injustice, and discrimination. Perhaps the most difficult aspect to contend with, as we sat down to arrange and edit the study, was the mundane dailyness that most forms of violence take. There is nothing exceptional, rather it is routine and ritualised.

This perhaps makes it all the more difficult to forget. As one of the researchers shared, she thought she had put the scars of her childhood behind her, but in writing them afresh, she realised how much of that trauma still lingers just below the skin. This is important to remember because we often perceive violence as an 'event', which is then followed by a public outcry and eventually a return to normalcy, life continues as it always does. However, as the ethnographies in this study reveal, it is precisely this 'normalcy' that needs to be interrogated. The process of repetitive acts and behaviours getting internalised, so much so that it becomes unnoticeable to the self. One starts getting used to violence and is unable to identify how it manifests in everyday life. This is how normative masculinity is produced and legitimised. This requires more in-depth study across contexts, where the 'everyday' as a site of excavation can allow us to understand broader processes of social relationships and structures.

The choice of producing ethnographies from diverse social locations was deliberate, even as we realise how many contexts have been left out of the scope of this study. Even though far from exhaustive, we hope that the intersections explored within the ethnographies reveal the impossibility of establishing any kind of 'universal' or essential masculinity/ femininity.

Markers of social difference greatly impact the way in which we can express our gender, and sometimes, there is very little room for conscious choice.

As we see in the experiences shared by researchers from lowered castes, there is a historical continuity to the forms of violence and discrimination they continue to face. It is difficult then, to isolate gender, without taking into account the interwoven realities of caste, class, religion, and so on. During our conversations, it was deeply insightful to see the way in which the same experience reconfigured itself based on caste/religious context, as in the case of rituals, marriage, festivals. In the experiences shared by researchers from lowered castes, we see that violence takes on more direct forms of murder, beating, and social boycott, whereas in the experiences shared by researchers from dominant castes, we see how violence is concealed within the anxiety of maintaining 'honour/izzat'.

The point is not to compare or construct a hierarchy of which violence is 'worse', rather to observe how caste and gender interact in different castes, while keeping in mind that there are crossovers, influences, and aspirations that travel between castes. Most importantly, for the purpose of this study, this opens our eyes to the ways in which caste codes our bodies and expresses itself through gender roles, regulations, and norms.

As one of the intentions of the study was to trace the ways in which dominant masculinity is produced, it was a deliberate choice to turn the gaze onto the everyday lives of dominant caste/religious communities. As one of our advisors on the study told us, the lives of oppressed communities have been on public display for far too long. It is time for those who hold power to also interrogate their own experiences and histories. In our monthly sessions, we explored these differences in social, economic and political power, through critical yet empathetic listening that allowed us to position ourselves in relation to one another. One of the researchers reflected how in her understanding, masculinity was always only the figure of the man, but in writing about her own life, she could now see the way in which certain systems and structures also produce this kind of masculinity. Moving forward, we believe, there is an urgent need to delve deeper into these intersections through contextual, culturally specific, geographically diverse ethnographies and creative explorations. This study is merely scratching the surface of how intersectional perspective shapes our understanding on gender and masculinity.

The conversations between us were not always about violence. In fact, one of the aims of the study was to broaden the inquiry around masculinities away from focusing only on violence/discrimination. Tentatively, somewhat

shyly for a group of people meeting for the first time (that too, online), we also spoke about our unfulfilled desires, love, and sexuality. In this, having Suresh, a senior activist and researcher, as part of the group was very helpful. His experience of living as a transman opened up unexplored conversations between all of us. Suresh deftly wove together many threads of self, community, activism in sharing his journey of transition, drawing our attention repeatedly to the arbitrariness of assigned gender and the possibility of 'rescripting' our identities. This allowed all of us to move beyond the binary of man/woman, to retrace our own lives and identify points where we did not feel in sync with the gender assigned to us. As one of our advisors told us, there is a funny assumption that only queer people speak of sexuality. But sexuality exists in each of us, no matter our orientation or age. In an inter-generational group, there were beautiful and poignant realisations of unfulfilled desires, silences, self-censorship and dreams, which perhaps merit a separate study of its own.

As we were a mixed group, the conversations were not without moments of tension and friction. Some people in the group had differing political ideologies and different positions on religion and faith. We found ourselves returning to the question of whether there can be a positive masculinity or whether masculinity itself needs to be dismantled entirely? While the theoretical possibilities are plenty, we were also reminded by each other's experiences that there are tangible, material consequences to 'performing' certain kinds of masculinity. Given the precariousness of our political climate, perhaps it is not always possible to script our own identities. There remains a distance between our private and public selves. This brought to our attention the difficulty of initiating conversations around masculinity in communally sensitive, mixed caste contexts, where there is a solid risk in challenging authority and power. As a small step toward addressing this, we are at the moment, developing a workbook that uses creative methodologies to initiate conversations on masculinity. In future years of taking this work forward, we hope we can find innovative, creative ways through which to transform the cultures of violence that we inhabit.

The work on gender justice/prevention of violence has long been premised on right based frameworks and/or demanding accountability from the law. These efforts are necessary and must continue. However, as we hope the ethnographies above have revealed, gender roles/regulations/norms are encoded in our daily lives: in rituals, festivals, community histories, inter-generational expectations, and so on. If we are to set ourselves the task of (de)constructing or rescripting masculinity and femininity, it requires us to engage with the social and cultural fabrics that envelop us. Rather than dismiss these aspects and insist on a more secular or rational identity, we must find ways to engage with popular culture, mythologies,

rituals, festivals and cultural practices, to seek out the progressive and radical elements, or to re-write our own. Working with arts and culture is a powerful way of intervening in these spaces, allowing communities that have been historically oppressed to find ways to express while simultaneously challenging 'traditions' that have long since enjoyed their legitimacy.

This work also requires close attention to language and vocabularies. A primary part of the methodology of this study was translation. As the researchers spoke Hindi, English, and Kannada, each conversation became a labour of translation. We struggled with finding words for concepts that have been theorised in English, to suit our lived realities. And we struggled with untangling the moral connotations of gender that are sometimes embedded in local dialects/language. The work ahead is difficult but necessary if we are to truly find ways to engage with the vast diversity and contexts that exist in this country.

Finally, at the present moment, we live in a society that celebrates and reaffirms dominant, normative masculinities. There are rewards and incentives to perform and perpetuate this form of masculinity. This makes the work of rescripting or transformation all the more difficult. Yet the first step could be to recognize that people exist outside categories, and that their lived experience cannot be reduced to an issue; that we are filled with contradictions, and that power is a continuum that flows every which way, not merely from top-bottom. We must find ways to critically interrogate ourselves, families, communities, friends, colleagues while also understanding ourselves in relation to broader social, political, and economic processes. Any work on power and privilege requires us to first check our own prejudices. It is uncomfortable and it is difficult to be truly open. Yet the more we try to engage with realities different from our own, the more keenly we listen, the more inclusive our work can become. Perhaps this needs to be the first step in imagining a society where we can truly script our own identities.

A playful speculation | Returning to our original question

At the beginning of this study, we have pointed out that the term masculinity can be etymologically traced back to *masculus* which refers to the male body. The rest of the study has in some way been devoted to undermining this association of masculinity with the male body. Ethnographic excerpts clearly reveal that masculinity exerts itself on female bodies, male bodies and queer bodies; and manifests itself in intersectional contexts. In this

study, we have also attempted a disentanglement of masculinity from adjacent and interrelated concepts such as gender, sex, patriarchy, ideology, power, and so on. If we have succeeded in undermining this association with the male body, then it is worth returning to the question of whether the object of our study - masculinity, that we have spilled so much ink to describe and analyse, should still live under the label of masculus? What precisely is 'male' about masculinity if it is not exclusively referring to male bodies or not even exclusively about gender, but rather about intersectional socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts?

In this sense, we can say that there is nothing 'ontologically male' about masculinity. Aggression is just a behaviour that cannot be genetically or in any other essentialist manner locked into a male body, but often we associate aggressive behaviour with masculinity. To use masculinity in this sense is to deploy it as a conceptual category that draws its logic from the historical, concrete, and uneven development of gender relations over time in a given society. When we call something masculine (or for that matter, feminine) we refer *historically speaking*, to that which men have been associated with in concrete situations over time. This is not to essentialise or reduce men to a set of behaviours or innate tendencies, but rather, refer to the historical development of gender relations where being a man has meant privileges, power, and domination over other genders. In other words, conceptual categories contain traces and refer back to the empirical reality of social relations and the power that flows through these relations. Masculinity refers to male bodies in the same indirect but fundamental way just as Brahmanism refers to Brahmin persons in an indirect but fundamental way. At the same time, it is perfectly acceptable to argue that both are not restricted to male bodies or Brahmin persons but can also manifest in other people as an attitude or a behaviour. Both manifest intersectionally. Both categories indicate the historical domination by a particular set of people who used precisely that axis of identity to exert power and domination, set up normative ideals and aspirations, and occupy the apex position in hierarchical social structures. In the coming years, as real gender relations undergo transformations in the context of other social dynamics, conceptual categories such as masculinity too will have to adapt, to explain social relations and struggles between individuals and groups of different genders.

In some ways this leads us back to the drawing board. If you have read this far, we hope you are not wondering what we have just put you through! Take it as an invitation to keep searching, keep on searching.

Annexure I

List of Civil Society Organizations

1. AALI- Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives
2. Agents of Ishq
3. Anandi
4. Azad Foundation
5. Breakthrough
6. Center for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ)
7. Center for Mental Health, Law and Policy (CHMLP)
8. CORO
9. Ekta Parishad
10. Girls Count
11. Ibtada
12. International Center for Research on Women (IRCW)
13. IT For Change
14. Jan Sahas
15. Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS)
16. MAVA India
17. Nishtha
18. Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union
19. Rajasthan Nirman or General Mazdoor Union
20. Rohini Nilekani Philanthrophies
21. Sarfaroshi Foundation
22. Sangath
23. Sanjog
24. SIEDS Collective
25. Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association
26. The YP Foundation
27. We are Yuvaa
28. Vikalp

Annexure II

Titles of Paintings

1. Cover Image: Periods
2. Contents: Wilful Suspension of Masculinity
3. Page 10: Dimensions
4. Page 14: Surgery
5. Page 19: Untitled
6. Page 21: Untitled
7. Page 31: Cleaning up Masculinity
8. Page 32: Blue Eye
9. Page 37: Untitled
10. Page 41: Us
11. Page 42: Grand Clitoris
12. Page 48: Untitled
13. Page 53: Tattooed Torso
14. Page 56: Salim Chacha
15. Page 61: Trans
16. Page 64: Untitled
17. Page 67: Rajeeva
18. Page 72: Man with Clitoris
19. Page 77: Sweet Home
20. Page 78: Me and Him
21. Page 82: Untitled
22. Page 86: Moopa and his friends
23. Page 94: Mansoor
24. Page 101: Third Eye
25. Page 104: Structured
26. Page 107: Accident
27. Page 111: Agnyani
28. Page 116: Untitled
29. Page 122: Masks
30. Page 124: Singer
31. Page 127: Surgery
32. Page 131: Untitled
33. Page 134: Untitled
34. Page 137: Masks
35. Page 142: The violet night
36. Page 146: Untitled
37. Page 150: Surgery
38. Page 153: Making Love to the Moon
39. Page 157: Untitled
40. Page 158: Stone Flowers
41. Page 161: Fire and Water
42. Page 162: Untitled

EdelGive Foundation is a philanthropic asset manager and advisory partner to funders such as individuals, HNIs, corporates, institutions and foundations—both international and domestic—with a specialisation in multi-stakeholder collaboration. Through a unique philanthropic model, EdelGive places itself at the centre of grant-making by providing initial grants and managing funding from other institutions, HNIs and corporate partners. These grants are used for both financial and non-financial growth of high calibre, small to mid-size grassroots NGOs, committed to empowering vulnerable children, women, and communities. EdelGive is committed to bring about sustainable long-term change by working with the system to enable the system. They are focused on enabling more partnerships within and between the corporate sector, the social sector, and the Government for far-reaching, sustainable impact, through collaboration, coalitions and co-creation. By supporting grassroots NGOs committed to empowering vulnerable children, women, and communities, EdelGive Foundation fosters and expands philanthropy in India.

Maraa is a media and arts collective, founded in 2008 in Bangalore. Registered as a public charitable trust, our work is located at the intersection of gender, labour, caste and religion. Our artistic work enhances and strengthens inherent leadership and creative capacities for marginalised voices that have been systematically oppressed and discriminated against. We believe everyone has a right to access, create and use arts and media in order to democratise and diversify its use. Our media work highlights connections between media ownership, technology and social realities through community led and open source platforms. Maraa also undertakes research and documentation, training and capacity building projects for Bluemoon Creatives.

About the Artist

Rumi Harish, wears many hats as a musician, writer, activist, playwright. He has worked in social justice movements, with a focus on gender and sexuality for the last 23 years. During his gender transition, his therapist recommended he take up painting, as a way to express himself, as his voice was also in a period of transition. He began painting and formed an inseparable relationship between his music, painting and writing. The paintings featured in the study allow us to enter the realm of masculine and feminine through different moods, shapes and forms. The paintings form their own narrative, complimenting and complicating the text. Rumi is also deeply committed to developing artistic and cultural expressions for and within queer and trans communities.