Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre's Perspective Paper II

South Asian Masculinity: Identity, Control and Violence in the 'Modern' Context

This paper puts forward our view of South Asian Masculinities and how it engages with the systems of power, patriarchy, caste, religion and ethnicity etc. in the current socio-economic, political context.

In women's studies discourse we have been saying that a woman is not born but made by culture. In fact that is the reason why we have the perception of gender as a social construct. There was a phase in women's studies when the thinkers thought about how a woman is made by the family and culture at large and patriarchy was looked at as a power - hegemonic monolith. But now for a long time, we have realized that even the boy in the family and in midst of social culture is also "made." In fact, in many cultures masculinity is made by women's perception as well. Women also internalize 'these' masculinities, as they do, the ideas about womanhood.

While we realize that there has been enough said, written and researched about power, patriarchy, masculinity, caste, class, ethnicity, language etc. from various standpoints, we must also realize that the perception was Euro centric or US centric. The perspective of the Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre is South Asian. Family is the central unit in South Asian culture and family structures the image of masculinity. In this sense the construct is culture specific, but on the other hand the construct has also picked up influences and contexts from other cultures. But before we talk about other cultures; within our own culture we see that **caste or ethnicity** have different notions of what is right and what is wrong. These notions are also dependent on the position of the caste group in the hierarchal structure.

For example we would like to draw your attention to the 'public-private' divide which has been seen and discussed from the international perspective, but if we look at the Indian scenario we must note that the family profession was practiced at home so that both men and women would work together in the extended family work space. The family profession was naturally defined by the caste system. So women belonging to some castes went to work in farms or other people's houses and there were men from other castes who assumed that they were therefore "more available". This argument can be extended to describe how as women choose and learn to express their opinions beyond the 'Laxman-rekha' dictated by the family and caste structure, she is labelled as 'rebellious, loose, witch etc'. Men and women who were supposed to be 'untouchable' but still that did not prevent the so called 'high-caste' men to exploit the honour of the so called 'low-caste' women. For example, in parts of Tamil Nadu, if this could not happen physically then there was a custom where a Dalit woman walking on the road had to put her 'pallu' down if she came across a 'high caste' man. Many a times it is also felt that the 'purdah' for women in many forms is only high caste or bourgeoisie or "Muslim" but there is a nomadic tribe in Maharashtra where women coming home after sunset are not allowed inside the house. Hence the whole notion of honour and masculinity is entwined with caste hierarchy and ethnicity. In fact if we look at the intersection of caste and gender we see many anomalies/nuances as far as the manifestation of patriarchy is concerned.

In the feudal period, though Hinduism was not as organized as other religions, the controls exerted by the priestly class on the family, on both men and women, were oppressiveand accepted by the society at large. In fact many families had a religious "guru" who assumed the role of the family patriarch. Each caste had its own system of controls and there were

controls between castes in the hierarchical order which we can even experience in modern times in the form of 'Jat Panchayat's'. These controls are not only imposed on women alone but even men who try to assert or deviate from the established norms and were ostracised by the community. These practices continue even today.

On the level of religion, in India in the middle ages, we see the established religion being challenged by 'other' expressions. The newer sects like 'Bhagvat' in Maharashtra gave space to people from the middle castes and lower castes, women from all the castes got entry into these popular sects gaining vigour in the masses. But when there is/ or was a crisis the word of the established religion is accepted. But later in the colonial period reformists accepted the derivations in the established religion.

When we are specifically concerned with South Asian history in our discussions on the construction of masculinity, it is inevitable that the colonial period should acquire an important place. In the colonial period we see contrasting claims to masculinities by the British masters and their Indian subjects. As rulers the British acquired a powerful "manly" image so they considered Bengali men as "effeminate." The Indian men felt the need to reassert their masculinity - which in the colonial period was related to the freedom struggle. But on the other hand, in some cases, masculinity was also expressed by the statement 'we are working with the saheb's'. The Hindu mind always nurses the statement 'I am pure and you are polluted' and in colonial times it acquired a political sense as well. In India the nation was looked upto as 'motherland' which needed to be protected by her 'sons'; the Hindu ideologue, Golvalkar uses the word 'pitrabhumi' or Savarkar uses the word 'punyabhu'.

A pertinent feature of the colonial period were the social reforms, which had women at their centre, but one can cynically call it the 'colonial wife syndrome'. Women were looked at as symbols of sophistication of menfolk but they hardly had any decision making powers. In fact she was still expected to fall in line with the traditional role of the daughter in law of the joint family. Some of the first autobiographies written by women in Maharashtra talked about this double burden very poignantly. . In the colonial period the duality of the office and public image and the role of the householder was underlined. This can be witnessed all around and we can see the continuity of this syndrome, though the manifestations are different today.

While discussing the colonial times one must mention a peculiar incident that happened; a coffee table book called "Mother India" written by American Historian Katherine Mayo in 1927, which critiqued Indian society, religion and culture became popular. Indian men felt a need to put a counter to the arguments and so created the myth of the 'Liberated Vedic Woman' which continues to be glorified. The other way of reacting to the Mother India argument was through socio-legal reforms. Herein, there was no agreement about the process. Some people said that you cannot give the right to interfere in the family matters governed by 'our religion' to a ruler who belong to the 'other religion'. However there were visionaries like Jyotirao Phule, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, V. R. Shinde who perceived freedom as an integral part of human rights and later we have Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who analysed the intersections of caste, patriarchy and gender.

The reassertion of national identity and freedom was also cultural. When the colonial rulers criticised the Indian culture the Indian men felt they had to counter this and they reinvented the ancient Indian heritage. In various South Asian countries we see this in the context of continuity and change. The inner need is to contest the notion of western supremacy and yet there is unconscious efforts to imitate the western image.

Western masculinity was especially appreciated for its scientific temper, rational attitude and knowledge systems. However, the colonial rule also re-established the existing power structures. They questioned the moral code as 'native' and tried to establish the Victorian Moral Code. As a result, the new legislations which were brought in were not uniformly judicious. The laws related to honour crimes can be seen in this context.

In general, we can say that patriarchal values were accepted by society at large. Family conditioned little boys into the structure, women also internalized these patriarchal values and trained boys. When thinking about South Asia, group mothering (joint family - where children grew up with mother's and mother like figures) is a special feature. Boys grew up with a lot of pampering by their mother's or mother figure's and stood in awe of their father or father figure's. The priest or the religious guru is also a patriarchal figure. If the priest is celebate, more reverence is shown to him because there is a notion that the loss of semen ('viryanash') reduces patriarchal valour. The fear of loss of semen is even internalized by women. So elder women of the family controlled the number of visits the bride makes to her husband's bedroom. This method of control is practiced across castes and classes.

Though there are immediate problems in dealing with South Asian patriarchy we have to consider the historical predicament without which we cannot come to the understanding of the present. When the British came as colonizers to different parts of Asia, their society had already gone through Renaissance, Reformation and they were going through Industrial Revolution. When the Asian society was confronted with the British culture, they were at different stages of feudalism and so to keep up with the British culture they had to go through the cultural processes without the temporal distance allowed to them by history.

However, without pleading for rationalisation of our present state we should analyse the reasons of our cultural complexities. The feudal mindset was so strong in South Asian countries (we are aware that the concept of feudalism changes with the context of each country) that the discourse of nation-state, democratic structure was logically disturbed by our historical baggage. For example even the interpretation by the various social systems of our ideal Constitution remains problematic. This is even true of person to person relationships and self-images of men and women in different social strata. So the concept of being in a particular century remains technical. One person in a particular context maybe staying in the 20th or 21st Century but in reality carries probably the mind-set of the 17th-18th Century. This is one of the prime causes of our fractured modernity.

In the present day context we need to bring in the impact of economic processes such as migration, displacement, urbanisation etc. into our discussion on masculinity and patriarchy. The inter-textual discussions between social structures and political-economic structures will give us a better understanding of the overt and latent manifestations of patriarchy. We have always described women as multi-tasking but even today's man, at work he might me in a hegemonic position or he might be at the lower rung of the ladder. The same exploited man carries himself as the lord of the house, the expectations of the various members of the household gives him that role and the disparity of the situation of the public-private role/s creates psychological problems for him. The concept of old day's valour has changed into achievement oriented valour, wherein, many men become the other. It is difficult to reconcile these many roles, so at times he takes recourse to violence. In this situation the labour force is victimised and exploited as never before. In place of globalisation of labour we have globalisation of poverty.

Inspite of all the democratic atmosphere around the world now the roles are created globally, so men and women hardly have any free choice and are dictated by the hegemonic

processes on what they eat, hear, see, think etc. World over language is used to express ones thoughts but one must not forget that it can also control the way we think. The political and cultural outfits have been using it for their benefit. We would like to bring in the role that mass media plays in controlling human free will, feed mind sets and decides on how we should see and hear things. We can here refer to the mass hysteria created by political and/or cultural outfits to condition the minds of people beyond logical processes. Though there are definitive geo-political reasons behind war, the animosity and extension of 'enemy feeling' is creation of this mass hysteria. Unfortunately it is perceived as nationalism, which showcases the masculine nature of our society. Here, cruelty is confused with valour, so its not surprising that women's bodies become sites of conflict in the process. For example, what happened in Konan-Poshpura in 1991, treatment meted out to the Chakma women between 1977-1980 by our military personnel are some of the examples of this display of valour. In this context we must be aware of the repercussions of the State violence and people's demand/ clamour for this kind of violence and State control.

Violence is not an occurrence that happens out there. A person or a group in the society is connected to it. Violence not only ravishes the enemy but the actor as well. It debases the Human in you. Why is it that violence is easily accepted? Why is hate speech more accepted? It is due to fragmentation in society and the human being. Though we believe in the freedom of a person, the person is a member of the group and society with various emotional and cultural contexts. But in the present day globalized society, men and women are reduced to lonely selves surrounded by things aplenty, ultimately reduced to a thing themselves. When we are thinking of the human situation we cannot but perceive it without inter-connectivity and compassion. Our argument is therefore not limited to women alone but clearly shows how the forces of patriarchy, caste, class, ethnicity etc play out in the current context of neo liberalism and globalization and affect all.

This phenomenon of atomisation is being dealt with a fascist revivalism which is manifested in various ways such as: clinging to one's caste, class, community, overt and public show of religious and cultural practices and events, such as festivals, dress code, obsessive practice of rituals, prayers, ceremonies etc.

We here see the breakdown of integrating social institutions, conventions and syncretic traditions and instead see a rise in the construction of a public discourse that is heightening the polarisation which is creating an aggressive environment and in the process manifesting itself in the use of brutal violence to assert so called desired identities.

We see the manifestation of brutal violence in street censorship which uses muscle power to silence any voice that questions 'their' belief…. in the same way Jat Panchayats like Khap take upon themselves to punish people for their 'deviant' behaviour.

In India we have very recently witnessed the horrible incident at Dadri where what happened to Mohamed Ikhlaq and his family is obscene. He was dragged out of his home and killed within minutes by a mob on the rumour of having stocked and consumed beef. A similar case was recently reported in Jharkhand. Many politicians have spoken including those who seem to want to use this tragedy to provoke and justify the use of violence to assert the so called 'preferred' identities. It is not just a problem limited to religion but extends to any voice that is in disagreement with the dominant thought. For example Sudheendra Kulkarni was called a Pakistani agent for offering a voice to someone from the other side.

In Pakistan a minority of murderous mullahs have managed to take over the adjudication of who is a true Muslim and therefore entitled to be a real Pakistani. People are not allowed to protest or disagree with the most retrograde interpretations of Islam. In April 2015 a Pakistani Human Rights activist Sabeen Mahmud was shot dead by anonymous assailants soon after she held a discussion on "Human Rights and Baluchistan" at her NGO, The Second Floor, thereby destroying any hope of creating a safe environment for cultural expression.

In Bangladesh we see that in the recent years there have been an increasing intolerance to dissent and the government is adopting a more authoritarian style targeting and putting constraints on activists. In May 2015 a publisher of a slain online critic of religious militancy was hacked to death in Dhaka hours after similar attacks wounded two other secular writers and another publisher.

This is quite similar to what we have seen in India in the recent past where the rationalist and revolutionary voices of Narendra Dabholkar (anti superstition and black magic), Govind Pansare (activist and writer who spoke on behalf of common people and against aberrations of history) and M.M.Kulbargi (writer and scholar who wrote to put the revolutionary and 'deviant' religious behaviour into perspective and crusader of anti idol worship) were silenced and the killers are still on the run.

Because of the very nature of the Indian Constitution, people who at their very heart cannot accept egalitarianism, pay political lip service to it. Their social behaviour and the systems which support them look at every person as member of a particular caste or ethnic group. They sincerely believe that birth qualifies or disqualifies a person.

So many years after independence women and young people belonging to different excluded groups have been given new opportunities, but even when they have proved their merit, their presence in decision making is only 7%-9%. But in the public discourse the picture is painted as if Dalits and Muslims are favoured citizens. This atmosphere is intrinsic in higher places of education where even meritorious Dalit scholars are given a feeling of being an out caste. The recent suicide on the Hyderabad campus of Rohith Vemula and many others which preceded him are testimony to this.

Through this paper we would like to pose the question: why does the idea of masculinity dominate our way of life in the 21st Century? The fear of freedom and loosing control drives the forces of power to reassert themselves in fascist forms. On one side whilst there is a process of modernisation (giving people more physical mobility, technology, education, empowerment etc), we see that there is a fear of freedom and a need for continuity of control as there is a fear of 'life' outside this 'control'. Hence in this paper we have asserted that the very phenomenon of modernity has assumed a fractured condition and is an important concern for the development of South Asian societies.

There is a need for the political and social culture of South Asian societies to revitalise its intellectual tradition and live up to the true definition of modern principles of democracy, equality, liberty and justice.

Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre believes in inter connectivity and the very notion of inter connectivity rules out the differences created by birth, like that of caste, creed, pigmentation of skin. Under the legal system every individual should be equal and should be given equal opportunity. It is time that we should shake off the shackles of differentiation and at

the same time nurture selfhood. There is and never was a dead end in history. Let us talk together and act together and work towards an egalitarian and humane future.