

Asia-Europe People's Forum
Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
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Participatory Democracy, Gender Equality, Minority Rights

'Masculinity and Participatory Democracy'

Good evening everyone! I would like to thank the AEPF organisers for giving Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre for Social Justice and Peace in South Asia an opportunity to put forth our views on the subject and also involving us in the planning and organising process of this particular theme. We see this as long term collaboration between us and the Forum.

Mrinal Gore once said "that the very definition of democracy is participatory, which means the involvement of all in the true sense of the word. It is not mathematical equality but fairness and equal opportunity. Thus striving for democracy in this sense is an on-going process with perhaps no final point of arrival."

I come here to represent the ideals of Mrinal Gore, a tall visionary leader, firebrand socialist, a people's politician, former MP, great fighter who upheld the rights of the masses. She had a vibrant personality and worked *with* the deprived and not for them. Her work cuts across political and social lines while transcending gender barriers. She epitomized a generation of women who were visionaries, leaders and undoubtedly pioneers of modern India. With her passing away on July 17 2012, India lost one of its finest crusaders of public cause. We as her colleagues had been discussing ways of commemorating her and then decided to establish this Centre, which was officially launched in December 2014, with a South Asian Conference on Violence. It is a space for dialogue and discussion on issues of socio-economic, political importance, currently focusing on the theme of South Asian Masculinity, which is, inter-sectional. The reason behind this being that Mrinal tai, as we all fondly call her, believed in process more than result.

During the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975, Mrinal tai went underground and organised several protests. She was not just running away from the prison but moving around Maharashtra and India, talking to people about participatory democracy, gender equality and minority rights in the context of Emergency, which implies a loss of fundamental rights.

Universally, we have seen that whenever our fundamental values are in danger by the hegemonic forces we feel the urge to communicate with each other, across borders and find it necessary to hold hands. In this period of globalisation it seems that we are closer and together but still it does not provide us with the comfort of togetherness.

Each country or community is going through a trauma seemingly for different reasons, yet we have a feeling that at the root of it lie probably the same anomalies. When the world was euphoric about globalisation, one didn't really deal with the 'national' feeling that we were all used to - I need not elaborate that the national feeling here is hardly geographical. The cultural core of this feeling has been used positively and negatively down the history. And now as we come to such a space as this Forum we have a feeling we cannot afford to look away from the real perception of nationality.

Globalisation struck very hard on the national autonomy, by which I mean, people, forest and land. There are inevitable contradictions within the process of globalisation. Those

who do not want to question globalisation present it as a unifying process for the whole world (global village concept) but those who feel the inner need to challenge or contradict the forces of globalisation fall back on the loss of identity rhetoric. The rhetoric is heartfelt sometimes, but it can turn into hollow sectarianism. Globalisation had a sense of power, hegemony which was akin to masculinity. That is how in this conference we will see the connections between the traditional masculinities and the newly developed masculinities. For example, women today have the opportunity and aspirations to 'fly high' and yet the age old role of a dutiful daughter in law is used by the modern media again and again to reaffirm the patriarchal way of controlling the women folk.

Every major power in the world is struggling with economic, social and political churning. These major powers are also experiencing the rise of conservatives, religious fundamentalists, racists, hyper nationalists, misogynists. The problem now is that these fringe groups are no longer fringe. In an era of uncertainty they propagate conservatism, yearn for 'golden past' and scorn the so called secular cosmopolitan elite. The tool used by them is that of mob politics and muscle power, to impose its will and make space for conservatives, misogynists and everything which is not participatory and democratic. They rely on creating an atmosphere of mass hysteria, which is directly against democracy and rationality. Political illiberalism is the order of the day; we in India are also feeling the sharp end everyday. Law is being used to attack activists' and political opponents. We are currently experiencing virulent right wing offensive, the roots of which go back to the 90s, which saw the rise of the hindutva forces. Since then we have seen the ruling class embracing the neo-liberal prescriptions purveyed by imperialist capital and international institutions like the IMF and World Bank. I must mention here Mrinal Gore's work on Nagri Nivara Haq (experiment on affordable housing) in 1980s on the surplus community land which was a challenge to developmental capitalism. Socially, we saw the rise of sectarian ideology based on communal, caste and ethnic identities, which fragmented and polarised the society and gave rise to divisive forces asserting sectarian identities. It gradually led to a remolding of society from a pluralistic and composite culture to a chauvinistic homogenized version and an increasing penetration of globalised imperial culture and its values.

In many countries, not only in India, women and politics are discussed solely with reference to the percentage of their presence in democratic houses. While in the women's studies it has always been held that the outlook to life and gender has to change. The hegemonic moulds in the societal structure must break down. On the contrary, what we see today are newer ways of asserting masculinities. Sub-consciously even women have internalised some of these masculinities. For example, in India we have a strong legal redressal system yet we see a reassertion of 'Caste Panchayats' (a village council) who assume authority to punish the so called 'guilty'. Guilt is established not by modern principles of jurisprudence but by caste, class, ethnic and religious identity. Crime committed in its name is called 'honour killing'.

Masculinity appears in the family relations, in the societal perceptions and even at work places, where now men and women work together. This fundamental side of human behaviour gets reflected into politics. So democracy which is and should be participatory remains at the level of tokenism. Democracy relies on your respect for the other human being without 'othering' him or her on the basis of caste, class, religion, birth, creed, sex etc.

When we talk of not enough participation in the democratic structure we are not only referring to women or the deprived classes but we are thinking of the society in general. In

a democracy, a voter, who votes, has a pathetic sense of loss because when he/she sees the representative, he/she does not see a reflection of his/her values or aspirations, because the representative is bound by the party system, which is again masculine and the voter after electing him/her to power loses all access to him, until the next elections. This is not a new phenomenon, Jayprakash Narayan (an independent activist, social reformer and political leader) during his movement for 'Total Revolution' had asked for the 'Right to Call Back' for the voter.

The power of money and muscle in the election machinery is contradictory to the values and aspirations of the people in general, these contradictory powers of social structure vs the power of sheer number of a particular caste or community leads to a clash of interest. People like us who really care for the participatory democracy must be wary of democratic process turning into a number game or a power game.

Although elections and results are a number game but philosophically, as Gandhiji said we should look at democracy from the sense of humanity. The electoral process leads to outcomes that undermine core democratic values. Democracy aspires to be more than the rule of the mob that gets the most votes. This is why freedom of speech and of the media, civil rights and other constitutional protections, an independent judiciary are part of what defines true democracy. What we see around us is that those who win power don't care about any of these things, then how can we trust masculine, racist people to protect the civil rights of the groups that they attacked in the process of coming to power or to defend them against their own marauding supporters. In a true democracy you have to believe that the other person could be right and this possibility should not be ignored in the process.

If we look around us we see that right wing parties are taking over the governments everywhere, how do we explain as to why countries like UK, US and France who have been in the forefront of promoting democracy end up here and like this? A part of the answer lies in the fact that when a political group acquires hegemonic powers it becomes the ruling class by itself or brahmanical in Indian parlance.

Talking about migration, we see and know of the practical difficulties that one faces and see the humanitarian differences on the ground, yet one feels in a gathering like this the need to open our cultural borders and breakdown the power of hegemonic consciousness to greet our brothers and sisters. Every nation has a cultural identity and history but we have all collectively contributed to that identity and history, so are we going to make the differences a major concern, is a question that we need to ask ourselves.

In India, politics always has been personality oriented but in recent past the larger than life 'saviour' image created by the media is not appreciated by democratic citizens. The majority religion uses tradition negatively; it represses various cultural and religious caste minorities. The problem of migration persists and as a result there are groups of people who have no country, we deeply sympathise with this international problem but I would like to communicate with our friends that even within one nation there are communities which feel that they are living the life of a refugee.

If true participatory democracy has to survive then every human being as a thinking animal must be respected - which of course needs to be mutual. The democratic institutions have to be inclusive not only in form but by nature. The decision making in a democratic system must be really open without having to take referendum at every call. Participatory democracy as a system and process can only survive in a truly humane atmosphere.

We are a small Centre, which in its own little way is trying to make a difference and developing strategies to counter the hegemonic forces. I am happy to share some of the methodologies which have been adopted by us with our friends in this Forum.

1. We know and realize that people all over are affected by the hegemonic powers, which try to undermine the values and principles that people like us stand for, thus we at the Centre starting from the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat and then moving to the North and North West and now to the North East have started a process of dialogue and debate on the theme of South Asian Masculinity and how it affects the people of a particular region. The uniqueness here is that this space brings together both survivors and activists, theorists and academics, who dialogue, exchange and interact, which lends courage and solidarity to people fighting their lonely battles. It re-energises all of us in the process and gives strength and a feeling of togetherness to stand against these hegemonic forces. The idea is to give voice to one another and help each other in the process.

2. Although in this global world we all seem to be so near but in reality there is a sense of loss of communication amongst us as various layers have been created and we are more ghettoized today than ever. In our small way we are trying to create a space for cultural closeness, which got divided and we are doing this without using any moulds, roles or rituals.

3. The atmosphere around us is stifling and difficult, but will not remain so and thus we all are trying to change it, bring about a qualitative change in values, in the texture of life - it's not easy but constant.

4. Its important to communicate across borders, build solidarity, strengthen movements and more importantly, academically, we don't need to borrow from the West but create our own body of knowledge. We have started taking baby steps in this direction by writing papers, publishing periodic reports and trying to reach out to people.

5. The Centre is beginning to conduct training workshops with survivors and activists to awaken the capacity of the people to think and look at their issues from a different lens, which is truly democratic and humane.