

Book Review

Gender, Power and Identity – Essays on Masculinities in Rural North India

Prem Chowdhry, Orient BlackSwan, 2019

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Understanding violence in north India as a reaction of crises faced by masculinity required a deep dive into its causal roots. Prem Chowdhry has analysed the iniquitous causality of gender inequality by comparing the economy of power relations from pre-colonial to the post-globalized era. The introduction explains how masculinities as an academic pursuit in India have not picked up as a genre of work. Some essays published elsewhere have been placed in a systemic order, the conclusions are reworked to situate the crises on democracy resulting from the contradictions of solutions posed by Indian masculinity trends.

This book has addressed the gap in understanding concepts such as honour, liaison within caste boundaries, and the internalization of social control in the rural hierarchy with the economic perspective of volatile gender relations. The establishment of new state boundaries as in the case of Haryana redefined loyalty towards sanctions curtailing an existing culture of freedom. The author thus situates the concept of honour as a construct for maintaining social caste hierarchy which got juxtaposed with the militarization of masculinities.

The highlight of this book is a methodological delight. This chapter sets the trend of the alternate through a humorously presented family history of the author. Besides this chapter, all the essays authored by her were published between the period 2005 to 2015, with a very rich referencing that interlinks official data, archival evidence, laced with captivating oral traditions from Haryana.

The use of oral traditions informs analysis to communicate norms. From this study I was informed that oral traditions were used not only at the local grassroots but also by colonizers to work their recruitment and justice systems. Such an exercise helped them to perpetuate the image of patriarchal benevolence to win loyalist. Similar nuanced administrative strategies have been substantiated with examples from seasoned data from her 35 years of rich field and desk research in the region. Credibility of sourcing data to trace the history of masculinity from the undivided Punjab to the time of establishment of Haryana has interesting element of detail from the verdicts given by traditional rural authority that has existed through the ages, even today, to undermine the current ruling statutory power system.

The author argues that gender relations in the pre-colonial times were defined by consent in marriage as well as sexual liaison. She narrates folklore and idioms to evidence the existence of gender-equal choice. Both women and men made choices driven by the demand of labour to make the unproductive Haryana terrain yield agriculture and animal husbandry produce.

The option of earning through a job in the British army and government services such as schools and the postal department required basic education. The British loyalist were paid off through concessions and positions to foster inequality resulting in establishing the insubordination to germinate violent seeds of masculine norms.

The cultural context of rural north from the masculinity lens has been well depicted in two different essays to trace the strengthening of an ideological construct of patriarchal assertion. The male use of violence in the region is on the decline as quoted by Chowdhury who traces alternatives and the wind of change through different historic periods.

Caste and class hierarchy are not the only ones that challenge the masculinized hegemony which is ridiculed by women besides the lethal strokes of socio-economic waves. The author sites specific details through examples of the contestation of the male stature as reflected in the mood and messaging of three different folk songs sung by married women in the essay titled 'Popular Perceptions of Masculinity'. The women when left alone during marriages sing songs where they chide their aspiration of seeking lovers from among the outliers like fakirs, performers and lower caste men in search for better male virility. The organized attempt to subvert such discourse by men according to the author's research did not work and this situates contestation of power within the gender hierarchy. This subversion opens the possibility towards gender democracy that remains alive in women's popular culture. The narrative of the challenge women pose on the sexual adequacy on the male and his ability to income source is always within the hearing distance of the men from their childhood. Men thus congregate in spaces and indulge in either building their muscles or contraband activity such as substance abuse.

The geography of masculinities through the position and public spaces it controls do not escape the author's refined reasoning in most essays through the book. The spatial determines privileges that is the pepper displayed on the fluid power bastions. Whereas jobs in colonial area were taken by higher caste men this changed when reservations gave more jobs to the Dalit men. Armed with jobs in government services, the opportunity to impact the social hierarchies opened up for the lower caste men. This was then countered with the upper caste occupation of the

Khap or the traditional Panchayat that controls the sociological framework to maintain the movement of women outside the village social net to provide labour and reproduction within equals alone.

Having read the author to refine my own learning I view this feminist historian as a lighthouse whose analysis educated the policy maker to address the gender and generation gap in inheritance. The discourse on land rights and control of resources by the land-owning communities has been enriched by the intersectionality poised by the relevance of the book to understand both the personal and the political of the reader's quest for answers. The first readings however throw more questions than answers. Subsequent readings of the same chapters shed light on historical processing of information to guide individual answers for a way out of the maze of fact and lore.

In the essay that places the Crises of Masculinities in Haryana, the loss of male control over their own destiny is unfolded. The choice before the male in the wake of high unemployment, women laying claim on their right to land and youth getting elected for formal panchayats, the police or the justice system is determined by the non-productivity of land and the constant declining sex ratio in the region. The less number of females per male and their joblessness inflicted singledom on the Haryana male. These contexts are analysed by the author to place the stances taken on by traditional or the Khap Panchayat. The power of the elder higher caste males was eroded by the youth who got elected to Gram Panchayats. The elders addressed their masculinity crises by ordaining themselves the role of safeguarding the village norms in the form of cultural and customary law. The traditional panchayat in Haryana till date prevails at a much higher hierarchy to rule through a regime that makes statutory powers redundant in the case of formalizing conjugal relationships.

The essays explain the complexity of maintaining status quo of cultural norms by

a continuous cross referencing of cases dealt through the traditional panchayat that have made to regular news in national as well as published in the vernacular press. The women of Haryana origins have registered dissent with silent support from their men, in a few cases. However, not all women born or married into the region have had much success in moving the democratic space.

The Haryana Commission for Women saw no human right violation on the issue of buying girls and women as brides for sexual and all other forms of exploitative labour. Charity to the poor by including them as slaves has been a strategic choice practiced before feudalism. The practice not only has a political impunity based on the social sanction of the caste leaders, but it also acts as an internal power balancer. The choice of buying brides is shown to be typical for lower caste men, who flaunt the price they can afford to buy their legitimate needs. It additionally completely marginalized and isolated the bride, and her child as well, who was not from the state and stayed in the field, and did not mix with the family due to language and class handicap. This price paid is often spoken off to cement the bondage of the woman to stay on till the price can be paid back for her to buyback her freedom. The apparent social and physical exploitation of the women in such a marriage is inevitable. The men who marry such women also do not hold the same position as those who have marriage liaison sanctioned by the Khap.

Industrialization brought pliable migrants to work and reservations of government job to the lower caste not only increased unemployment but also control on marital and even sexual liaison. The woman had to bear the brunt of transgression of caste and norm boundaries whereas the man valorized by traditional caste leaders and the unemployed and unmarried men for the number of murders he had successfully committed with the range of weapons used. The men had sanction to buy brides from poor families from other states even as their status for doing so only placed them lower in the social ladder of the rural hierarchy.

The concluding essay on the 'Contradictions in Masculinities' has been reworked to place the might of alternate authority that exists within the fluidity of convenience and connivance of all that is extrajudicial and unconstitutional. The hope for dissent finds a mention with examples of ordaining women as members of Khap and the upholding of a united caste that is required to keep the rural economy floating. The show of caste unity does smother the dissent into silence especially when the written law fails to protect the victims of masculinities. The chapter on 'Alternatives present to the militarized masculinities' in the post-independence era is most interesting. It showed that alternatives can always work themselves through individual hard work. Therefore, the option to strengthen the possibility of a way forward is forever a choice to be made. This is true of the all ages; therefore it is seen that dissent is omnipresent to break inevitability of emerging normative behaviours.

The lived experiences of host of informants active in civil society, media, and the academia have also been depicted in the self-curated design of the book cover that is a painting by the author. The painting of a man holding his bamboo staff depicts his combative stature with an expression that does not give away emotion, not even through his eye that do seem paralyzed in a puzzled perpetuity.

In the era of radicalization of fundamentalism, this book will be referred to by those who wish to understand causal roots to either weak or for contributing towards strengthening masculinities. Since the compilation of the essays is placed within the historical formation of trends to record social change with law, this book could be used by inquisitive lawyers. For the analysis of the local institutions such as the Khap Panchayat, and practices of safeguarding honour, the book will immensely interest social work scholars too. Gender relations courses have to use this as a text book to laud the seminal nature of this academic research on the Indian masculine discourse. The concluding paragraph of the book is powerful and deserves to be understood better through several in depth readings of facts sown together in this book.

About the reviewer: Dr Shivani Bhardwaj has researched on gender resource gap for over two decades with a human right framework. She has led work on women and land rights to advocate for policy and law reform through

networks she has set up and coordinated. Her work on mainstreaming gender and child rights, mental health results in interaction with the excluded to link with them with academic and social reform interests.