

## Western Region

**Academic seminar on ‘The Representation and Reconstruction of Masculinities in Western India,’ held on September 12-13, in partnership with the Department of Politics & Public Administration, Savitribai Phule Pune University**



The last three decades have witnessed the slow but sure emergence of pro-feminist men’s interventions in India and around the world. They have given rise to a significant scholarly enterprise - Critical Masculinity Studies, and have found expression in a large number of civil society initiatives. And this academic seminar was held as part of the process. The primary focus of the interdisciplinary seminar in Pune was to explore various aspects of masculinities and sexualities in the region within national and global perspectives, and to suggest directions for further research and interventions to promote the long-term project of dismantling patriarchy. Accordingly, it brought together more than forty concerned scholars and activists. A day prior to the seminar, Rahul Roy's documentary film on masculinity, youth and class in urban India - 'When Four Friends Meet' - was screened at the Department of Politics & Public Administration, and drew an audience of over 50 students.

The seminar opened with introductory remarks by seminar coordinator Dr Mangesh Kulkarni. The keynote address was delivered by the senior feminist scholar Dr Meera Kosambi, critically assessing the historical legacy of the male project of social reform in the region. The speakers in the academic sessions belonged to a variety of disciplines - History (Mr Shyam Pakhare), Sociology (Dr Vishal Jadhav, Dr Manisha Gupte, Dr Gaurang Jani), Literary & Cultural Theory (Dr Shoba Ghosh, Dr Aarti Wani, Mr Zameer Kamble), Economics (Dr Rohini Sahni, Dr RS Deshpande), and Legal Studies (Dr Nilima Bhadbhade). They deployed diverse theoretical frameworks to shed light on the representation and repercussion of masculinities in seemingly disparate but interlinked contexts encompassing colonialism, caste, sports, sexuality, religion, politics, violence, cinema, the theatre, sex work, agrarian distress, and criminal justice. Their presentations interrogated and built upon the existing scholarship on masculinities within and across disciplinary boundaries.



The speakers in the activists' sessions shared their experiences and reflections pertaining to the reconstruction of masculinities for the creation of a gender-just social order. Many of them have been active for long in areas such as women's empowerment (Ms Aruna Burte, Dr Geetali VM, Ms Sadhana Dadhich), public health (Dr Shashikant Ahankari), as also dalit and tribal concerns (Mr Shahji Gadhire, Ms Lata Bhise-Sonawane, Mr Mohan Hirabai Hiralal). Others like Ms Snehal Velkar and Mr Kelvin John have been engaged in programme management

and documentation at prominent NGOs working on gender issues. Mr Shreyas Kamble - a student who has completed a course on 'The Politics of Masculinities' at the Department of Politics & Public Administration- explained how this experience brought about a positive change in his outlook on gender issues.

The seminar is seen to have given a fillip to Critical Masculinity Studies, create synergy between research and activism, and generated insights that would boost pro-feminist interventions in the region and beyond.

### **Western Regional Symposium in Pune**

*'Expanding the Canvas: Deepening the Dialogue,'* a **Regional Symposium of Western India (Goa, Gujarat & Maharashtra)**, was organised in Pune by SAMYAK and supported by SWISSAID and Forum to Engage Men (FEM).

Anand Pawar of SAMYAK who facilitated the symposium discussions and Jaya Velankar, Forum for Women's Health, Mumbai, began the event by singing songs, adding that this was deliberately a part of the design of the symposium as men usually do not get involved in such activities.

Jaya said, "Since the last few years it has been specifically thought that men have to make a conscious effort in understanding the women's movement."

The first Plenary, "What Is Masculinity & Why Work With Men And Boys?" was chaired by Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, and the panellists were Sadhana Dadhich (Nari Samata Manch), Achyut Borgaonkar (Tathapi), Milind Chavan (MASUM) and Lata Bhise-Sonavane.

Ms. Sadhana Dadhich said, "Both men and women are cultivated by patriarchy."

Achyut Borgaonkar began questioning participants why do we needed to work with men separately? He added, in the struggle for equal treatment and equal

rights for women, men have been left behind but it was natural. Patriarchy prioritizes men from the moment he is born, in fact even before he is born. Women's secondary status is because of men and patriarchy. As patriarchy is appalling for women similarly it is dreadful for men too.

Milind Chavan expressed that feminist organizations had begun to dialogue with men who inflicted violence or were oppressive but its approach was not to work with men. He said, "Organizations working on HIV/AIDS have worked with men. There are some groups who believe that men are equally victim of patriarchy as much as women. But we believe that women have been victimized more than men. Despite that we feel there is a need to work with men against gender inequality and to protect democratic equality, and secular values. Under which we believe that men have to accept women's human rights and move forward towards equality. Men need to stand with women to fight on gender inequalities."

He pointed out, "Construction of masculinity happens at a very young age. Therefore it becomes essential to establish dialogue with men and boys so that they are instigated to reflect on their masculinity. We need to believe that men can change because construction of masculinity is social process. Addressing issues of masculinity has become crucial also in the context of caste based politics."

Lata Bhise Sonavane opined that masculinity attacks the constitution that has provided fundamental rights to women. "I consider it is essential to work on Masculinity or else the democratic structure would be dissolved in no time. I also believe that it is essential to work with children on masculinity, considering the growing cases of violence among the adolescent children. We need to teach them the responsibilities bestowed upon us by the constitution," she said.

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal expressed that feminist movement has made great contribution in focusing on patriarchy. There were active participants' responses to the plenary presentations.

The next session on 'Men and Violence' was moderated by Harish Sadani (MAVA, Mumbai), with speakers Urmila Salunkhe (Akshara, Mumbai), Jagdish (Nari Samata Manch), Rashi Vidya Sagar (Dilasa, Mumbai), Seema Shah (Anandi, Gujarat). Jagdish shared his experiences of working with married men's groups and youth groups in 20 villages of Pune district.

Rashi Vidya Sagar spoke of the counselling centre Dilasa that she runs, saying, "Dilasa counselling centre works on the principles of feminist counselling centre. We really do not know where men fit in feminism. But we have observed cases of sexual assault among minor boys and generally deal with two types of clients, victims of sexual assault and abusive men. We have observed that men too are victim of rape but do not reach us. They visit hospital when there are severe health consequences or when they are badly hurt. It is observed that victims of rape have several misconceptions related to their sexual status. It is difficult for rape victims to accept their victimization and powerlessness and desire to express aggression."

The session on 'Health, SRHR, Care giving' was moderated by Dr. Shashikant Ahankari (HMF), with the panelists being Mukta Puntambekar (Muktangan, Pune), IHMP (Pachod), Pritam Potdar (SAMYAK). The session, ' Making of men, sexualities and Identities' was moderated by Poonam Kathuria. Its panelists were Bindumadhav Khire (Samapathik), Sneha, Mumbai, Stree Mukti Sanghatana, Pune and Vijay Jagtap (Sai Life Care, Fonda-Goa).

Bindumadhav Khire expressed that there are multiple sexual identities and one need to understand and respect their existence. There are several grey shades in sexualities and to understand masculinities we would have to understand all of them. Bhaskar Bhauji said that we have realized that it is essential to work with men in order to deal with issues of violence against women and women's health and increase their participation so as to help them grow their understanding on gender issues, patriarchy and masculinity.

Sneha also believed it is necessary to work in the health and law and order systems, as in most cases decision making power and control lies in the hand of men. "We also have to understand that Samaj or Jat Panchayats continue to control societies, both in villages and cities. This kind of structure affects women and her status," she pointed out, adding, "We talk about sexualities to adolescent groups. We have reached out to 300 children and would be reaching out to 900 more. Recently, we have also initiated dialogue with men. Previously, we had initiated dialogue on violence with men." Participant Subhash Mendhapurkar of SUTRA opined that one should not impose one's discriminatory morals and values on children.

Discussions on, "Men and Masculinities in Media and literature" were chaired by Dr Mangesh Kulkarni, professor, Political Science and speakers at the session included Ravindra RP, writer, Geetali Vi. Ma (Purush Uvach), Wasim Maner (film director)

Dr Mangesh Kulkarni said representations of different kind of masculinities appear in the media, which also creates construction of identities. The concept of metro-sexuality is media generated. It reinforces existing concepts of masculinity.

Ravindra RP expressed that masculinity comes in different forms most of which is reflected in the media, particularly in Hindi cinema and its songs. It has portrayed multiple shades of dominant masculinity as well as soft, kind and wise masculinity. He pointed out that in literature it is observed that women who are masculine are praised whether she is Rani of Jhansi, Indira Gandhi or Margret Thatcher. Society values Masculinity and therefore honors its carrier, whether man or woman.

Feminist literature has progressed from expression of women's struggle for liberation to her individual growth as human. Now we need literature that would

express liberation of man from masculinity and his growth towards humanness. This progression would give us new direction towards masculinity.

Geetali Vi. Ma shared that currently, inclusive literature is available but in a smaller quantity. The literature available today which has larger outreach depicts patriarchy. Portrayal of women in television is negative with a few exceptions. The premise of Purush Uvach, she said, is to express male suppression in patriarchal society. At the same time it has also contributed to the creation of positive images of men.

Wasim Maner (Filmmaker) revealed that there are certain norms of entertainment film. Film makers who make successful commercial films exactly know what they want in a film and understand its saleability value. As a writer it is very difficult to choose sensitive subjects for cinema which is commercially viable. During the discussions with the audience, participant Sadhana Dhadich pointed out that a novel called 'Cuckold' by Kiran Nagarkar expresses different shades of masculinity. Subhash Mendhapurkar added that some TV serials expressed nuances and subtleties of gender issues. He said the masculinity portrayed by the advertising industry should also be discussed, adding that Dalit literature has presented issues of gender and that need to be unfolded

A feminist Marathi Play "O Womania" on the right to pee was then performed by Ojas SV and his team to build awareness on women's discomfort.

Participants' feedback on the day's session was that there was poor weightage on the issues related to minority and dalit communities. The inherent culture of dalit and tribal communities has promoted gender equality therefore there is a need to look into historical facet of community behaviour.

The next day's Plenary, 'Connecting the dots: Masculinity & Inter-Sectionality' was chaired by Subhash Mendhapurkar of SUTRA, and speakers included Kiran Moghe Janwadi Mahila, Ganesh Kadu, Shetkari Kamgar Party, Panvel, and Rajiv

Kalelkar of a disabled rights group. Subhash Mendhapurkar said that symbols of masculine identities have changed over the years, however we need to examine whether approach towards masculinity has changed. A presentation on 'Men & Globalization' was made by Kiran Moghe, who said, "Globalization has multiple shades and layers which affects human relations, therefore it is essential for us to look at gender inequalities in this purview. Though more women are offered work, it is mostly in unorganized sector, such as house cleaning, waste-work etc. Similarly, international organizations are taking efforts to recognize sex work as labour. So in such a situation commodification of women in the media to market products in the global capitalized economy has been established. This aspects needs to be examined from the masculinity perspective.

Ganesh Kadu said there is a need to redirect masculinity among the political workers into positive energy, for e.g. training given on Vishakha guidelines to political workers showed its impact when the young political workers introduced it in schools and colleges. He said several such initiatives can be implemented by associating with political leaders, which would broadly help society.

Speaking on 'Masculinity & Patriarchy in Relation to Disability', Rajiv Kalekar said, "Masculinity' portrays power & dominance; several men with disability desire to assert masculinity, they too desire to be like other men but they do not have strength as normal man, therefore they feel weak. Patriarchy controls power which percolates in masculinity whether he is disable or non-disabled man."

A participant said, "As a social worker we need to build understanding of economics & politics in context with masculinity," and another said, "Unequal distribution of work at workplace and home, disparity in wage, unequal rights over property reasserts masculinity in men. Men's control over political processes also contributes to masculinity, so these issues need to be cited from masculinity perspective."

Kiran Moghe agreed that with respect to globalisation, "we also need to cite in what aspects it affects patriarchy and masculinity and whether it is strengthening it even further. It is multilayered and very microscopic. So what we need to observe is what kind of jobs are offered to women after farming season, do they get wages or not, or what happens to the family and wife of the farmer who committed suicide."

The next plenary, 'Way Forward from Feminist Perspective' was chaired by Manish Gupte, MASUM, and panelists were Poonam Kathuria of SWATI, Gujarat, Dr Nandita Shah, Akshara, Mumbai and Anand Pawar, Samyak.

Ms. Manisha Gupte expressed that patriarchy has been central to the feminist movement. Feminism has made its strong mark in Maharashtra, particularly the socialist feminism. It has not tackled patriarchy in isolation but in correlation with caste systems and rights of the minorities. As feminist we are looking at masculinity with similar sensitivity and come here with an approach to strengthen organizations working on masculinity as a process of the feminist movement.

Interactive discussions then spanned a wide range of subjects, the symposium concluding with suggestions on how to take forward the work with men in various ways.