Masculinity and Its Challenges in India

Essays on Changing Perceptions

Edited by Rohit K. Dasgupta
and K. Moti Gokulsing

Foreword by Ruth Vanita

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Foreword

RUTH VANITA

Over the last decade, Women's Studies departments worldwide have been changing their names to incorporate words like "gender" and "sexuality." This is in part a response to the recognition that if, as de Beauvoir famously put it, one is not born but becomes a woman then men too are not born but are made. This book explores the different ways men are made in modern Indian cultures.

When I show icons, both medieval and modern, in my classes on Hindu texts and traditions, American students often react with surprise to what they perceive as the feminine appearance of the Gods, whom they have difficulty distinguishing from the Goddesses. This may partly be put down to their preconceptions of what constitutes manliness, but is also partly due to the androgyny of both male and female ideals as represented in icons of the divine. While demons almost always sport large moustaches, Gods are usually smooth-skinned and without facial hair, a tribute to their eternal youth, but also to an androgynous ideal of beauty. Furthermore, both Gods and Goddesses generally wear bright-colored decorative clothing and jewelry.

Enquiry into Indian nationalist internalization of Victorian ideals of manhood began with the seminal work of Ashis Nandy and has been carried forward by numerous scholars. This book is part of the new wave of scholarship that more fully incorporates self-chosen or ascribed sexual identities into the enquiry. As Nandy pointed out and scholars in the present volume confirm, the nineteenth century constitutes a turning-point of sorts, especially the period after 1857 when the self-view of both Hindu and Muslim men took a severe battering.

In my recent work on Urdu poetry and on what I term the poetics of play, from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth, I found that perhaps the most important indicator of the shift in perception and practice of masculinity is urban Indian men's transformed relationship to dress. In pre–1857 north Indian urban cultures, many men routinely wore jewelry and brightly colored clothing, footwear and headgear. On special occasions, they

also wore clothes richly decorated with gold borders, embroidery, spangles and beads. Such attire was not read by Indians as signaling effeminacy or any particular sexual predilection, although it is relevant that attraction to a beautiful young person of either sex was considered par for the course and had no bearing on a man's masculinity. Noticing and commenting positively on another man's looks and dress was common in both poetry and prose at this time.

Bright, shining clothing was not confined to young men. In 1803, the poet Qatil described his friend, the poet Insha Allah Khan, pen-name "Insha" (Elegant Style), preparing for Holi at the court of the Nawab of Awadh: "Insha Allah Khan Insha ... in a robe specially gifted to him as an honour, the yellow saffron color of which put Kashmir to shame, and the fringe of which shone like shimmering water in a garden of marigolds, set out for the festivities."[1]

Insha had served as a soldier and was renowned for his pugnacity. He was also known for his beauty, and his own writings, prose as well as verse, reveal his delight in dress. This interest was not at all unique to him. His intimate friend, Sa'adat Yar Khan, pen-name "Rangin" (Colorful), a professional soldier, was equally interested in sartorial matters, and describes himself as wearing a sparkling scarf on his head. Many Urdu poets of the period, in Lucknow, in Delhi and in Hyderabad, show a detailed and wide-ranging knowledge of the provenance of different types of fabric, men's as well as women's outfits, jewelry, make-up and shoes. When I read this poetry to modern audiences, both in India and in the U.S. or U.K., many people can hardly believe that men could be so knowledgeable about the nuances of female attire.

When urban upper and middle-class Indian men switched to Western dress over the course of the century following 1857, followed by upwardly mobile lower-middle class and even some working-class men in cities, the switch was accompanied by shedding color and jewelry. With this shift, we lost a whole way of being and a whole way of seeing. The Gandhi-led nationalist movement countered the switch to Western dress with *khadi*, but significantly the *khadi* worn by men was usually white or drab colored. In Indian villages, although the switch to Western dress is making rapid inroads, poorer men who have not made the switch continue to incorporate color into their attire in the form of such items as turbans, or *tahmats*, and often continue to wear these when they migrate to cities; also, in cities, Sikh men's turbans constitute, as it were, a bright spot.

I can testify from experience that working in a women's college in Delhi, where one is routinely immersed in a sea of rainbow colors, is vastly different from working on a campus in the U.S., where an occasional spot of brightness is all one sees in an expanse of gray, black, white and dull blue. Over time, I suspect, the difference in exposure to color affects one's emotional state and one's orientation towards work and play.

That attitudes to pleasure, play and sexuality in India underwent a major change in the colonial period proper is now well established. What is less researched and perhaps less measurable is the effect on the individual mind and being of losing a direct sensual (tactile as well as visual) relationship with color and glitter. Equally important are the emotional effects for everyone of losing about half the color visible in any Indian city on any given day.

It is often assumed, partly due to the influence of English Romanticism, reinforced by anti-consumerist thought, that emotions are properly directed only to living beings and to nature. I would venture to suggest, though, that emotional well-being may also be connected to a happy relationship with beautiful and sensually pleasurable material objects, such as clothing and jewelry. In the modern West, the importance of this category of emotions for men in particular has been kept alive largely by men who do not see themselves as exclusively heterosexual, beginning with Oscar Wilde (whom Nandy rightly characterized as an internal resister of the norms of Victorian masculinity).

In twentieth-century India, cinema has been perhaps the most important nationwide transmitter of past traditions of masculinity imbricated with emotion, *rang*, *rasa*, and play. Over the last few decades, designers, both female and male (many of them gay male), have reintroduced color into male festive wear, so that middle-class men who, earlier in the century, would have worn only dark-hued Western suits to weddings and celebrations are now equally likely to wear bright-colored *kurta-pajamas*, *sherwanis* and shawls. This perhaps signals a new self-confidence displayed also by many Indian women today whose wardrobes even-handedly incorporate Indian and Western clothing.

Masculinity studies is now working in tandem with gender and sexuality studies and sexuality rights movements to change perceptions of gender both on and off Indian campuses. The explorations in this volume move in many directions, from cinema, fiction and comic books to sexual identities and terminologies. Continuing earlier discussions and also opening up new avenues of enquiry, these essays signal the rapidly expanding focus of gender and sexuality studies in the Indian context.

Note

1. Quoted in *Kulliyat-e Insha*, ed., Khalil-ur Rahman Da'udi (Lahore: Lahore Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi Adab,1969), 51. Translation mine.

Ruth Vanita is a professor of liberal studies and women's studies at the University of Montana. She is the author of Gender, Sex and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India *(2012),* Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Culture *(2006), and* Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West *(2005).*

Introduction: Perceptions of Masculinity and Challenges to the Indian Male

ROHIT K. DASGUPTA *and*
K. MOTI GOKULSING

> *"The physical organisation of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid."*— Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1880:566
>
> *"A boy trying to pursue girls is common but boys pursuing boys has become a fashion. Gay culture in Hyderabad is increasing drastically. All the gay men in Hyderabad go to clubs or pubs once every week or ten days to celebrate. They drink and dance with whomever they want."*— TV9's homophobic story: Gay Culture Rampant in Hyderabad, 2011
>
> *"Gender inequality is a problem in this country."*— Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, NDTV: 28 December, 2012

The quotes above are indicative of the changes that are taking place in Indian society with regard to the bipolar world of distinctive masculine and feminine attributes. Following in the footsteps of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the new emerging field of masculinities and men has made some significant progress in recent years. R. W. Connell's publications since the late 1980s and in particular, her landmark book *Masculinities: The Science of Masculinity* published in 1995 have provided a useful theoretical account of gender and can be used as a starting point for the discussion of masculinities. One of its central points is that there is not one model of masculinity but rather multiple masculinities. As far as Indian masculinities are concerned, the available literature which includes some interesting work by Nandy (1983), Srivastava (2004), Osella and Osella (2006) is rather limited. The interdisciplinary essays in the current volume are aimed at helping to close this gap.

The subtitle of Connell's book *Masculinities* is *Science of Masculinity* and while some aspects of science such as, for example, clinical psychology, contributes to our understanding of masculinities, the main focus of the essays in the current volume is on how masculinities are socially, culturally and historically shaped. But a prime question we are confronted with is: how are masculinities formed and what contributions can they make to our understanding of the shaping of Indian men today?

One of the significant outcomes of the feminist movement since the 1960s has been to argue successfully that there is a distinction between sex and gender and that sex does not determine gender. This has led to a substantial literature exploring gender differences and their origins. Early feminist writers were mainly concerned with women's subordination in society and concepts of femininity. There has been limited attention focused on men and masculinity has been regarded as straightforward and unproblematic. But gender and sex have an ever-evolving meaning and recent feminist writers have criticized the idea that there is some essential female experience that divides all women from all men. Of the limits of the 1970s gender theory, Lynne Segal (1999:42) observed:

> Many men have little or no purchase on the power that is supposed to be the prerogative of their sex while a significant minority of women have access to considerable power and privilege. Gender binaries never exist in the contexts of race, class, age, sexual orientation and multiple other belongings — each with their deeply entrenched connections to power and authority, or the lack of it [quoted in Elliott 2009:190].

It is useful to remember that social movements in, for example, education, media, sports, religion, family and work helped the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. That period also saw the rise of gay liberation in many western countries. It was, however, Queer Theory that emerged in the USA during the 1980s which opposed the idea that heterosexuality was the only normal and natural sexuality and homosexuality was rejected as a distinct category of people and behavior (Fulcher and Scott 2003:170).

However, just as there is a great diversity in the feminist movement so that we speak of "feminisms," so too is there diversity in the field of masculinity, enabling us to speak of masculinities as they are influenced by such variables as class, caste, age, nationality and identity.

This volume draws together thirteen scholars concerned with exploring masculinity in an Indian context. A very large part of the thinking and writing about Indian men is confined to a narrow stratum with an urban, middle class bias. In the last few years there have been a few book length studies on various aspects of Indian masculinity which have used interdisciplinary approaches to the subject (Srivastava, 2004, 2007; Osella and Osella, 2006,

Alterno and Mittapalli, 2009). Theorizing Indian masculinity is a challenging experience. In a common sensical sense masculinity refers to characteristics or qualities which are considered typical or appropriate to a man. But how does an Indian man differ from others? Is it indeed even possible to make a distinction between the experiences of men in diverse societies that comprise our world or is there one hegemonic male authority that we try to problematize? These are some of the questions that the contributors to this volume had to grapple with when trying to understand Indian masculinity.

Masculinity, unlike femininity, is most often unseen or unnoticed owing to the normativity of its nature. It is unmarked because it is taken to be the norm and not thought about unless in opposition to something else. It is precisely because of this "significant absence" (Barthes, 1967: 77) that its silence speaks. Over the years and across numerous contexts, men's bodies have become important sites where masculinity has been played out. Connell presents a new framework in order to provide a more convincing and nuanced explanation for the construction of masculinity. In her essay "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity" in 1996 she explained how masculinity is constructed from a very early age within the aegis of an education structure where practices such as curriculum division, sports and disciplining systems reinforced a gender dichotomy. Another striking feature of her essay was the recognition of the different forms of masculinity, which "do not sit side by side" (1996: 209) and she flatly rejected the idea of men being a homogenous group of oppressors. Masculinity can therefore be seen both as hegemonic and marginalized. Some masculinities are more honored than others, while others such as homosexuality and queerness flatly stigmatized and marginalized. Hegemonic masculinity refers to a position of authority and dominance. This hegemony is not just in terms of other masculinities but in relation to "the gendered order as a whole" (ibid). One manifestation of this aspect of masculinity is patriarchy. Walby (1990) calls it a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Patriarchy in India as in the rest of the world has seen a shift from its private nature, where women have been oppressed by their husbands, fathers and other male members of their family, to public patriarchy where they are collectively subordinated by a society led by men. Ancient Indian texts such as the *Manusmriti* contain numerous references of prejudice, hatred and subjugation of women under a patriarchal system:

> Men may be lacking virtue, be sexual perverts, immoral and devoid of any good qualities, and yet women must constantly worship and serve their husbands [5/156].

However the theory of patriarchy is not without problems as Bradley (2013: 207) has argued, the difficulty of using a "totalistic theory based on

only one dynamic is that it presents a distorted view of all women as victims" and all men as perpetrators. What we want to argue is that men carry the burden of victimhood as well. The patriarchy that systematically subjugates women also subjugates men who do not conform to the class/caste and sexual subjectivity of the mainstream.

Indeed despite the fragmentary efforts made during the last few years, there exists a vast difference that distinguishes the lives of men in different parts of India which is impacted by caste, class, religion and sexual orientation. It is therefore very difficult to put together comprehensive descriptions of the vast and complex realities of Indian men in one volume.

Colonial Masculinities

One of the most important areas of research in gender and postcolonial studies is the analysis of indigenous masculinities within colonial contexts. This contour of exploration foregrounds the gendered, race and class dynamics of colonialism and nationalism and also provides opportunities for alternative gender practices that challenge hegemonic structures of white, middle-class patriarchy. In theorizing the production of masculinities in postcolonial systems, it is useful to remember that an interplay between power and structure creates hegemonies which in turn transform indigenous ideologies of gender and power.

Questions around representations are central to an understanding of postcolonial masculinities. Masculinities in the colonies were created and perpetuated as a contrast to the colonizers' own masculinity. For instance, native African and Indian men were seen as hypersexual whose sexuality was a threat to the virtuous white woman in imminent danger from such unchecked sexuality, thus creating a justification for colonizers to check and discipline other cultures. The predatory nature of men was reviled and violently subdued through colonial practices. Practices such as polygamy, sati, and burkhas were seen as a part of the widespread patriarchy existing in the colonies and providing the pretext for the "white man saving the brown men from brown men" (Spivak, 1988:297). The argument was that if Indian men could be so patriarchal and violent within the confines of their family, how could they be fair in their dealings with the British government (Sinha, 1995). This imaginary essentializing of colonial masculinities serves to both obscure and appropriate an unsettling difference.

Colonialism itself was a highly gendered process which was driven by a gendered force of subordination. According to Mclintock (1995), to understand colonialism and postcolonialism one must recognize that race, gender and

class are not distinct but rather come into existence in conflicting ways. Postcolonialism itself is an unsettling development and recent work by Rumina Sethi questions its scope and existence (2011). The masculinity of the postcolonial male then needs to be interrogated within contradictory sites of complex interaction between racial ideologies and the state. The postcolonial male has been represented as one with no agency whose subordinate presence in the colonial lexicon renders him powerless. However this assumption is based on a false universal and generalized colonial condition.

Much of the current scholarship about the nation and gender has fixated itself on the role of women who are constructed as symbols of the nation and "mother" land. Thus as the literary critic Sangeeta Ray (2000) points out, more than often the women's bodies become sites of contesting culture, tradition and the nation. However in recent years questioning this gendered version of nationalism has thrown up new questions on the role of masculinity and the male body. Kavita Daiya proposes that while violence by men against women has gained ascendancy in recent academic discussions, there needs to be a more deliberate focus on the violence suffered by male bodies in the public sphere (2006, 2008). John and Nair in their seminal work *A Question of Silence* point out that "questions of male sexuality have rarely been a focus of scholarly analysis except for celebrated instances of celibacy" (1998:15) in India. In fact the Gandhian gloss of the "necessity of overcoming desire as the irrevocable truth of the Indian male milieu" (Srivastava, 2004:15) has been commented upon by scholars such as Srivastava (2004, 2007) and Kakar (2007). This desexualization, de-eroticization of the Indian male sexuality is important in postcolonial India as it can be seen as a reaction to the imaginary essentializing of the hypersexual native male in the colonial era.

Queer Masculinities

The expansion of the British Empire in the eighteenth century also dictated colonial policies of sexual regulation, which were driven by a Victorian "fanatical purity campaign" (Bhaskaran, 2002:16). The British anti-sodomy law was introduced in Britain in 1860, which reduced the punishment of sodomy from execution to imprisonment; however when enacted in colonial states like India as in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, it was seen as a retrogressive move. The law states:

> Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term, which may extend to ten years, and shall be liable to fine.

Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section [Arondekar, 2009: 76; Bhaskaran, 2002: 15].

Prior to the enactment of this law queer sexuality was accommodated if not approved. As Vanita and Kidwai point out "at most times and places in pre-nineteenth century India, love between women and between men, even when disapproved of, was not actively persecuted. As far as we know, no one has ever been executed for homosexuality in India" (2000:xviii). However with the passing of this law, homosexuality was officially condemned by the state and framed as a criminal activity. This is not to say that colonialism entirely drove queer sexuality underground but rather it can be argued that colonialism acted as a device to obscure the queer identity, an unwillingness to "come out" to the public. It signified ambivalence about revelation of queer identities. In colonial India the minoritization of queer sexualities was a political agenda of purporting queer sexuality as a "special oriental vice" (Ballhatchet, 1980; Bhaskaran, 2002). Ballhatchet (1980) suggests that sexual energy was another reason for imperial expansion, he mentions British men with "tastes which could not be satisfied in England ... agreeably satiated overseas" (1). However there was anxiety by the British administrators about the sexual freedom India posed for its people, and homosexuality was blamed on Indian customs. Lord Curzon once remarked: "I attribute it largely to early marriage. A boy gets tired of his wife, or of women at an early age and wants the stimulus of some more novel or exciting sensation" (cited in Ballhatchet, 1980: 120).

Ballhatchet describes the various debates in the Parliament at the possibility of sexual relations taking place between the white elite and the native subordinate groups. There was a need for sexual regulation and one major point of concern was the presence of prostitutes in the army cantonments, however, "the prospect of homosexuality was revealed in guarded terms by the authorities whenever there was a talk of excluding prostitutes from the cantonments" (1980: 162). This might seem contradictory to the Victorian morals of that time but it would appear that the fundamental concern was for the preservation of power by the authorities to regulate the lives of those under their command. Attitudes to sexual conduct are likewise correlated to the safeguarding of vested interests and constitution of power.

Robert Aldrich argues that "colonialism ... encouraged sexual irregularity, heterosexual and homosexual" (2003:4). The colonial aspects of homosexuality suggest sexual ambivalence which produced both physical and emotional desire and also illustrate a variety of homosexual relationships. Aldrich also notes that "the colonies provided many possibilities of homoeroticism, homosociality and homosexuality" (ibid: 3). Thus there was a multiplicity of pos-