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Natives, Subjects, Consumers: Notes on Continuities and Transformations in Indian Masculine Cultures

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Abstract

This article explores recent histories of masculine cultures in India. The discussion proceeds through outlining the most significant sites of the making of masculinity discourses during the colonial, the immediate post-colonial as well as the contemporary period. The immediate present is explored through an investigation of the the media persona of India's current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Through constructing a narrative of Indian modernity that draws upon diverse contexts -- such as colonial discourses about natives, anti-colonial nationalism, and post-colonial discourses of economic planning, 'liberalization' and consumerism -- the article illustrates the multiple locations of masculinity politics. Further, the exploration of relationships between economic, political and social contexts also seeks to blur the boundaries between them, thereby initiating a methodological dialogue regarding the study of masculinities. The article also seeks to point out that while there are continuities between the (colonial) past and the (post-colonial) present, the manner in which the past is utilised for the purposes of the present relates to performances and contexts in the present. Finally, the article suggests there is no linear history of masculinity, rather that the uses of the past in the present allow us to understand the prolix and circular ways in which the present is constituted.

Keywords: Indian masculinities, colonial masculinity, post-colonial masculinity, consumerism

Nativos, Sujetos, Consumidores: Notas en la Continuidad y las Transformaciones de las Culturas Indias Masculinas

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Resumen

Este artículo explora historias recientes de las culturas masculinas en la India. La discusión continúa a través de esbozar los sitios más importantes de la elaboración donde se han concretado los discursos de masculinidad durante el periodo de colonización, la post-colonialización inmediata y en la actualidad. El presente artículo describe una investigación de la personalidad mediática del actual primer ministro de la India, Narendra Modi. A través de la construcción de una narrativa de la modernidad de la India en diferentes contextos - como discursos coloniales sobre los nativos, el nacionalismo anticolonial y los discursos post-coloniales de la planificación económica, la "liberalización" y el consumismo - el artículo ilustra los múltiples aspectos relacionados con la masculinidad política. Además, la exploración de las relaciones entre los contextos económicos, políticos y sociales también pretende diluir los límites entre ellos, iniciando así un diálogo metodológico sobre el estudio de las masculinidades. El artículo también pretende señalar que si bien existen continuidades entre el pasado (colonial) y el (post-colonial) actualmente, la manera en que el pasado se utiliza para los fines del presente se refiere a actuaciones y contextos en el presente. Por último, el artículo sugiere que no hay historia lineal de la masculinidad, ya que los usos del pasado en el presente nos permiten comprender las formas circulares y extensas en las cuales se constituye el presente.

Palabras clave: masculinidades indias, masculinidad colonial, masculinidad postcolonial, consumismo

This article seeks to explore cultures of masculinity in India through investigating relationships between different kinds of histories and political economies that characterise Indian modernity. These relationships emerge out of a number of contexts, including the social symbolism of the post-colonial state, the politics of ‘Indian traditions’, ideas regarding economic planning and the ‘free’ market, and articulations between new consumer cultures, family forms and individual subjectivity.

Masculinity studies is located in a scholarly context within which the concept of gender has come to be seen to offer a means of renewing feminist discourse by encouraging a more relational approach to masculinity and its perceived antithesis, femininity. It also allows of the investigation, problematization and interrogation of masculinity, equally with femininity. Notwithstanding these enabling possibilities, however, gender is still largely deployed in contemporary social science discourse as a synonym for women, its relational aspect obscured and the invitation to interrogate masculinities largely ignored. This article proceeds from the position that the study of masculinity is important in that it ‘is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality and culture’ (Connell, 2005, p.71). Further, as the historian Rosalind O’Hanlon has pointed out, ‘A proper understanding of the field of power in which women have lived their lives demands that we look at men as gendered beings too’ (O’Hanlon, 1997, p.1). Hence, the study of masculinity concerns the exploration of power relationships within the gender landscape, where the dominant ideals of masculinity impact both on women as well as on different ways of being men. This way of understanding masculinity is an exploration of the naturalization of the category ‘man’ through which men have come to be regarded as both un-gendered and the ‘universal subject of human history’ (O’Hanlon 1997, p.1).

The field of masculinity studies inspired by feminist approaches to gender has a different history to that of feminist scholarship and activism. The different histories of women’s studies and masculinity studies account for this situation. Feminism’s political project sought to identify, contest and dismantle the naturalization of gendered subjectivity across diverse

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contexts such as labour, religion, parenting, sexuality, the state, domesticity and creativity. The historical experience of being a woman has been fundamental to the project of feminism and personal experience has fuelled the politics of resistance and change that interrogates patriarchal structures. Within India-related feminist scholarship, the struggle against patriarchy has also engaged with the articulation of patriarchal frameworks with those that derive from, say, class and caste privilege, ethnicity and capital. The most significant participants in feminism's project of transformation have been women since their experience of power has been both immediate and lacerating. The sites of production of counter-discourses are those where the effects of power are directly experienced.

The gender politics of Indian modernity has primarily been traced through exploring discourses surrounding women. The female body and 'feminine chastity' have had significant careers as sites of interrogation within feminist historiography as well as sociological and anthropological studies that seek to track the complex contours of power in the making of sociality. India-related scholarship has produced a rich body of work relating to topics as diverse as women as repositories of Indian traditions (Mani, 1993; Chatterjee, 1993a; Sunder Rajan, 1993), the nation as goddess (Ramaswamy, 2010), tele-visual femininity (Mankekar, 1999; Munshi, 2010), women and Hindu nationalism (Bacchetta, 2004; Chakravarty, 1998; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995) and women and new middle-class class identities (Donner, 2011).

'Gender', however, has rarely been understood in its proper sense as a relationship: one between women and men, and between men, women and various other kinds of genders. And yet, as a steadily accumulating body of work suggest,

A proper understanding of the field of power in which women have lived their lives demands that we look at men as gendered beings too: at what psychic and social investments sustain their sense of themselves as men, at what networks and commonalities bring men together on the basis of shared gender identity, and what hierarchies and exclusions set them apart. (O'Hanlon 1997, p.1)

In order to stand in a relationship of superiority to feminine identity, masculinity must be represented as possessing characteristics that are

binary opposites of (actual or imagined) feminine identity. However, this is not all. Dominant masculinity stands in a relationship not just to femininity but also to those ways of being male that are seen to deviate from the ideal. It is in this sense that masculinity possesses both external (relating to women) as well as an internal (relating to ‘other’ men) characteristics. Both these aspects assist in bolstering what scholars have referred to as ‘hegemonic’ masculine identity (Connell, 2005). So, the heterosexual, white-collar married male who is the ‘breadwinner’ is a useful (if somewhat caricatured) type to think about hegemonic masculinity. For, embedded in this representation is an entire inventory of the behaviours and roles that have been historically valorised as becoming of ‘ideal’ masculinity. Hence, the dominant modes of being men could be said to be manufactured out of discourses on sexual orientation (heteronormativity), class, race, conjugality, the ‘protective’ function of males and women as recipients of protection, and the place of emotions in the lives of men and women.

Ideas of dominant and ‘hegemonic’ masculinities, as significant as they are, do not, however, exhaust ways of comprehending male cultures, particularly in the non-western world with its prolix colonial and post-colonial social, political and economic histories. This article explores the trajectories of cultures of Indian masculinities across a number of recent registers of social and political life. It is not exhaustive in scope and is intended, rather, as a selective introduction to the topic that is, nevertheless, indicative of significant themes and preoccupations within Indian society.

Recent Histories of Indian Masculinities

Masculinity refers to the socially produced but embodied ways of being male and, as suggested above, not only does it signify relationships between men and women but also those between men. The following discussion on some of the sites and processes of masculine cultures in India is, in this sense, also an exploration of the hierarchy of male-ness. I will begin by outlining some recent histories of masculinity as there are specific relationships between these histories and discourses of the Indian present.

The colonial era was particularly important in the career of modern masculinity. It can be argued that colonialism consolidated forms of masculinity that combined the valorisation of science, the ‘feminization’ of

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non-European people, and the perceived role of men in expressing their masculinity. In many ways, then, colonialism became an expression of the masculine ideal which had been developing in Europe through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Histories of colonialism also suggest that an understanding of modern European male identity is incomplete without a concurrent understanding of the colonial encounter. However, we should not take from this that colonial powers, such as the British in India, *invented* certain types of masculine cultures and introduced them into the culture of the colonies; and that certain ideas that came to be associated with masculinity—such as being war-like—simply did not exist in colonised societies before colonialism. As Rosalind O’Hanlon has argued, “martial masculinity” (O’Hanlon 1997, p.17), to take just one example, was an important aspect of pre-colonial life, and the colonizers built upon it and incorporated it into discourses of colonial masculinity. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that there was an intensification of certain forms of discourses around masculinity that occurred during colonialism and that several of these continued to circulate during the post-colonial period.

The term colonial masculinity expresses the importance of the relationship between two social contexts, viz., colonialism and masculinity. Colonial masculinity does not simply refer to the ways in which colonial processes produced certain ideas about natives; rather, this term also suggests that colonialism influenced the identities of both the colonized as well as the colonizers. It is in this sense, for example, that the making of British male identities during the nineteenth century should be seen as related to events and processes of the colonial era. One scholar speaks of this relationship between European identity and the colonial sphere by asking us to ‘rethink European cultural genealogies across the board and to question whether the key symbols of modern western societies—liberalism, nationalism, state welfare, citizenship, culture, and ‘European-ness’ itself—were not clarified among Europe’s colonial exiles and by those colonized classes caught in their pedagogic net in Asia’ (Stoler, 1995, p.16). Keeping the above in mind, let us briefly explore some of the contexts of colonial masculinity.

The nineteenth century British public school presents us with a rich site for the analysis of gender configurations during the colonial era. For, these institutions not only produced the (elite) personnel for the colonial

enterprise—administrators and soldiers who manned the levers of empire—but they also manufactured a coherent discourse on the connection between gender, religious identity, and the colonial civilizing mission. The British public school was a crucial link in the making of discourses of ‘muscular Christianity’ and ‘moral manliness’ through which colonialism came to be identified both as divine calling as well as a rite of passage for ‘real’ men (Mangan 1986). The ideal of moral manhood (Mangan, 1986, p. 147) took on the nature of an imperative that defined the essence of elite British malehood, and, explained the glittering successes of the imperial enterprise.

The public school emphasis of physical prowess as a significant ingredient of leadership articulated well with those discourses of imperialism where ‘manly men’ were to be in charge of the world’s affairs. As ‘real’ men, the colonizers possessed a justification for bringing vast areas of the world under colonial rule, for not only were they bringing civilization to these areas, they were also the harbingers of scientific thinking to people who had earlier been unscientific and hence wanting as human beings. ‘It is this vision of rationality as a relationship of *superiority*’, Seidler says, ‘that gets embedded within modernity and which helps organise our relationship with the self within western culture’ (Seidler, 1994, p.16 Emphasis in the original).

Within the colonial sphere itself, the obverse of the masculinisation of Britishness, was the feminization of the natives, where the latter term refers to the attribution of ‘women-like’ traits to women in the context of the lower value placed on feminine gender identity. Hence, whether in Asia, or in other parts of the colonized world, there emerged a remarkably consistent discourse on the native’s incapacity for self-government and informed decision making due to his inherent ‘effeminacy’ (see, for example, Sinha, 1997). This argument was bolstered by a number of others that derived from a variety of pseudo-sciences (such as colonial psychology and psychiatry) that sought to provide the proof of this position.

As one historian has pointed out, the process of the feminization of the native has a history that is intimately connected to perspectives on the nature of the non-western milieu. At the close of the eighteenth century, Robert Orme, official historian of the East India Company was to speak of Indians as ‘people born under a sun too sultry to admit the exercise and

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fatigues necessary to form a robust nation’ (quoted in Sen, 2004, p.77). And that such people:

were naturally weak in their constitution. As a result of this general lack of strength, the most popular source of livelihood was the manufacture of cloth, spinning and weaving. The weavers of India were deprived of the tools and machine skills available in England or other parts of Europe, yet their cloth was of exceptional quality. Such remarkable skills were accounted for in the fact that the Indians in the form of their labouring bodies possessed qualities unique to women and children (Sen, 2004, p.77).

However, while some natives were feminized, others were represented as ‘martial races’ (Omissi, 1991) and hence worthy of respect, even though they could not be regarded as equals of the British since they did not possess sufficient intellectual prowess. The martial races idea—one that was never fixed but changed according to circumstances—was particularly deployed in India in the aftermath of the 1857 Indian mutiny against the colonial rulers and was significant in the subsequent reorganization of the Indian army. New groups came to be identified as particularly suitable for making war, while others—usually those identified as trouble makers during the mutiny—were effectively excised from recruiting mechanisms. The Sikhs and Gurkhas—martial races to this day—benefited from the context produced by post-1857 political anxiety over native loyalty and an earlier history of ‘racial hygiene’ (Omissi, 1991) that decreed that ‘pure races’ produced the best kind of military men. As historians have emphasized, the taint of effeminacy fell most heavily upon those sections of the native populations who were seen to have formal education of a similar kind to the rulers, and hence conversant with the ideas of freedom and liberty which Europeans characterized as the legacy of the Enlightenment. The ‘effeminate Bengali’ (Sinha, 1997) was the antithesis of a martial race and, perhaps, the best known of a number of such stereotypes that circulated during the colonial era.

Closely allied to the effeminacy perspective was the colonial discourse on non-heterosexual masculinity. In the wake of a European history of the production of the homosexual as a distinct identity, one that an influential line of thinking (Foucault, 1979) has identified as closely linked to the rise

of a normalized bourgeois identity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the colonial sphere saw similar stigmatization of non-heterosexual masculinity. It is now a common enough observation among scholars and activists that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that prohibits ‘unnatural sex’ is, in fact, a colonial artefact that was brought into law in 1861. The relative lack of censure regarding homosexual relationships as a fact of pre-colonial Indian life – an aspect remarked upon by many historians – slowly gave way to public and legal heteronormativity.

The colonial era in India did not, however, completely overwrite those indigenous contexts where gender identities continued to be ambiguously inflected. The example of the transvestite performer in the regional Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi theatres during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a case in point. During this period, Kathryn Hansen points out, there existed a public cultural space of ‘transgender identification and the homoerotic gaze’ (Hansen, 2004, p.100) that was sustained by a number of highly celebrated male performers such as Naslu Sarkari, Jayashankar Sundari, and Bal Gandharva. Hansen further notes that ‘The Pleasures of the homoerotic gaze and transgender performance were linked in the urban theatre with the satisfactions of social and economic privilege. Both Jayashankar Sundari and Bal Gandharva, rather than bearing any stigma, became national icons and recipients of the Padma Bhushan [an official civilian honour]’ (pp.118–119). Finally, in this context, it is important to note Hansen’s contention that the popularity of the transvestite male performer such as those above cannot be simply attributed to the lack of availability of female performers; rather, she suggests, that it may actually have been due to a preference for female impersonators who, in fact, competed with women actors. Notwithstanding the existence of hybrid spaces such as the above, however, it is reasonable to say that the dominant tendency among the Indian intelligentsia of the period was to accept the rigid binaries of gender identity that colonialism intensified; after all, the tradition of the transvestite performer did decline, his place eventually taken by women actors doing women’s roles. Perhaps the most salient context within which masculine identities became codified according to the colonial discourse was that of nationalism. National identity came to be seen as a way of reconstituting the subject position of Indians on a number

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of fronts, and gender was one of these. So, the nationalist response to the British characterization of ‘Indian effeminacy’ was to both to seek to provide ‘proof’ to the contrary, as well as embark upon measures of improving and rejuvenating Indian masculinity. Rather than interrogate the colonial model, nationalists implicitly, agreed with its premise that Indians lacked manliness and sought to rectify this ‘defect’ through various means.

Historians have pointed out that this ‘self-image of effeteness’ (Rosselli, 1980) came to be widely accepted among nineteenth century Indian (Hindu) intelligentsia, and many among them came to believe that the ‘emasculatation’ was, among other things, due to the long history Muslim rule which had reduced Hindus to the status of a subject population. Attempts at ‘rectification’ were many and varied. So, one response was connected to the acceptance of the association between science and masculinity, and consisted in promoting the spread of western science. Indeed, being scientific also became an indispensable sign of Indian modernity. Religious thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda and Dayanand Saraswati sought evidence for Indian manliness and rationality in ancient texts; and institutions such as famous boys-only Doon School, established in 1935 with explicitly nationalist aims to produce an Indian boarding school for the training of a modern intelligentsia, became important sites for the development of a post-colonial scientific masculinity (Srivastava, 1998).

It was also this context that was the grounds for the emergence of certain discourses on the relationship between masculinity, caste, science and the future possibilities of nationhood. I refer to the emergence of a significant sexology and eugenic movement in the early 20th century in India. In 1927, N.S. Phadke, Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy at Rajaram College in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, published his *Sex Problem in India. Being a Plea for a Eugenic Movement in India and a Study of all Theoretical and Practical Questions Pertaining to Eugenics*. Phadke pointed out that his discussion was concerned with the exploring ways of maintaining the vigour of a ‘declining race’, for [he said] ‘who could deny that physical strength and military power will be for us an indispensable instrument to keep Swarajya [self-rule] after it is won?’ (Phadke, 1927, p.8). In effect, Phadke was making an argument for the ‘scientific’ nature of the caste system and how it was based on the ‘science’ of eugenics. ‘It need

never be supposed', he was to say, 'that the ancient Aryans were ignorant of the first principles of eugenics' (Phadke, 1927, p.18). Along with Phadke, another significant figure in western India was the medical doctor AP Pillay, a key personage in the family planning movement that persists to this day. In 1948 Pillay published *The Art of Love and Sane Sex Living* and was many years the editor of *The Journal of Marriage Hygiene*. In both Phadke and Pillay's writings, there is both a concern for the nature of Indian masculinity after Swarajya (self-rule), and also the play of the politics of upper caste masculinity at a time when anti-caste movements were gaining public voice. Their argument connected the caste system and eugenics with modern nation-hood in as much as the caste system was presented as being able to produce the kind of men – through 'scientific' selection – who would be required for modern and robust nationhood.

From Scientific Masculinity to Homo Economicus: The Five-Year Plan Hero

Contiguities between colonial and post-colonial regimes of thought across diverse registers have been extensively documented by scholars (see, for example, Chatterjee, 1993b). These extend to discourses of masculinities and include contexts of masculinities and caste politics (Anandhi & Jeyaranjan, 2001), masculinity and Hindu nationalism (Bannerjee, 2005; Chakravarty, 1998; Chakraborty, 2011), and celibacy and the male body (Alter 1992, 2011). Cultural discourses of science and masculinity continued to play a significant role in the life of the modernizing post-colonial nation-state in the decades following the end of colonial rule. The discourse of 'scientific reason' was deployed during the early post-colonial period to define modern subjectivity in India and formed a cornerstone of thinking regarding the project of the transforming the 'native' into the 'citizen'. The national heroes of post-colonial modernity were, typically, men such as scientist and statistician P.C. Mahalanobis (1893-1972), an active member of the Brahma Samaj movement that sought to 'modernize' and 'reform' Hinduism, keen researcher of anthropometry, founder of the Indian Statistical Institute, and a leading influence upon the formulation of India's second Five Year Plan (Rudra, 1996; see also Chatterjee, 1993b,

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chapter ten, for a discussion of social aspects of economic planning in India).

It is the context of twentieth century theory of economic development, as expressed through the post-independence planning regime and concurrently articulated in the Hindi films of the 1950s and 1960s that animates this part of my discussion. What is of significance is the relatively popular currency of ideas that located post-colonial Indian modernity within the spirit of a ‘scientific’ world-view. In another work (Srivastava, 2004) on the career of India’s most famous ‘playback’ singer, Lata Mangeshkar (b. 1929), I have discussed the emergence during the immediate post-independence period of a masculine type I have referred to as the Five Year Plan (FYP) Hero, and have suggested that ‘Lata Mangeshkar’s shrill adolescent-girl falsetto’ (Srivastava, 2004, p. 2020) was intended to be the feminine counterpart of a specific post-colonised masculinity, that of the FYP hero. The FYP hero of Indian films represented a particular formulation of Indian masculinity where manliness came to attach not to bodily representations or aggressive behaviour but, rather, to being ‘scientific’ This was the idea of a middle-class ‘epistemological’ or science-based masculinity as it emerged from institutions such as the Doon School, a boarding school for boys established in 1935 (see Srivastava, 1998). One of the ways in which epistemological masculinity came to be represented in Indian cinema was through the operation of very specific spatial strategies, where roads and highways and metropolitan spaces came to be the ‘natural’ habitat of the FYP hero. As well, an important strand in 1950s and 1960s films was the profession of the hero: he was an engineer (building roads or dams), a doctor, a scientist, or a bureaucrat. In significant instances, the filmic presence of the hero was one which could be quite easily characterised as ‘camp’. However, the camp persona of the heterosexual hero could co-exist quite comfortably with a nationalist ideology which identified post-independence manliness as linked to the ‘new’ knowledges of science which, it was held, would transform the ‘irrational’ native into the modern citizen. In the field of popular culture, the immediate post-independence period was particularly important in terms of representations of what could be called the aesthetic of planning and development.

The iconic presence of the FYP hero gained some its legitimacy through the Keynesian models of economic thought, and he stood both for government intervention and for delayed gratification through the re-investment of savings for the ‘national’ good. The FYP hero represents, in a broad sense, a particular formulation of Indian masculinity where manliness comes to attach not to bodily representations or aggressive behaviour but, rather, to being ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ (Srivastava, 1996).

In the Indian case, economic development policies, especially in the guise of the Soviet inspired Five Year Plans, traced a particular lineage to the world of science through, among others, the public lives of mediating figures such as P.C. Mahalanobis, mentioned above. Spatial strategies, I have noted above, played a significant part in representations of the FYP Hero. So, in the films of 1950s and 60’s, the bitumen road became the space of encounter between the hero and the heroine, backdrop to crucial song sequences, and the linear space which provided the musical interlude for the display of the FYP hero’s technological aptitude as he adeptly handled that epitome of modernist desire - the motor car. Indeed, roads and highways in these films carried such an aura of a planned modernity – all those aspirations of ‘progressing’ in both literal and figurative senses – that the woman at the steering wheel and women on bicycles riding along the open highway become one of the most powerfully evocative representations of ‘modern’ Indian woman-hood.

The recurring association between the road/highway and the FYP hero served to emphasise another point: that of the ‘natural’ milieu of the FYP hero: the metropolis. We get some idea of the metropolis as a structuring trope through a series of post-independence Hindi films. So, ‘in films such as *Shri 420* (1955, Raj Kapoor), *New Delhi* (1956, Mohan Segal), *Sujata* (1959, Bimal Roy) and *Anuradha* (1960, Hrishikesh Mukherjee), the struggle over meaning and being in a post-colonial society takes place in a context where the metropolis is always a willful presence’ (Srivastava, 1998, p. 165). Here, as in other films, the metropolis is, by turns, a site of decadence and extravagance luring ‘innocent’ people into its web, a progressive influence upon ‘backward’ intellects, and the promise of a contractual civil society that would undermine the atavism of kin and caste affiliations, ostensibly typified by the cinematic village. But perhaps, most

importantly, the metropolis is also home to the modern, male, ‘improver’, the FYP hero.

The Demise of the Five-Year Plan Hero

It has been variously noted that the cinematic success of India’s best known Bollywood star, Amitabh Bachchan (b. 1942), lies in the anti-state, ‘angry-young man’ presence of his on-screen persona (Prasad, 1998). This is not doubt true. However, I would also like to speculate that Bachchan brought to the screen some other very significant aspects of small-town masculinity, one’s that have to do with the consuming and expressive capacities of the previously unrepresented provincial – non-metropolitan – male body.

I suggest that a significant aspect of the Bachchan phenomenon concerns the representation of provincial masculinity in a metropolitan milieu. And that, unlike films of the 1950s and 60s, in Bachchan’s films – his biggest hits were in the 1970s and 80s – the provincial man comes to be associated with various forms of action, commerce, and individualism. Hence, the Bachchan hero moves – physically – through a world of container terminals, five-star hotels, wedding-cakes, fancy-shoes, international brand alcohol, dance halls, casinos, airports, and other sites and objects of industrial production and consumption. The Bachchan hero is the first generation consumer, having recently broken the shackles of the savings-regime of the FYP political economy. He is both anti-statist in taking the law into his own hands, as well as harbinger of the age of consumerism. His significance lies in the iconisation of the loss of faith in the intentions and capacities of the (Nehruvian) Five Year Plan state, as well as the positioning of the provincial male as a potential participant in consumerism. Further, through Bachchan’s body, metropolitan and provincial spaces become intertwined: provincial masculinity haunts metropolitan spaces, seeking to share in its fortune, interrogating its life-ways, and taking up residence in its shanty and slum localities.

The FYP hero model of masculinity was located within the Keynesian model of economic thought, representing both government intervention and delayed gratification through re-investment of savings for the ‘national good’. While the FYP Hero was not a-sexual, his sexual self could only be read as the preoccupation with reproduction, rather than recreational sex: he was the father of the nation. We might say, then, that the putative Indian

concern with ‘semen anxiety’ (see [Alter, 2011](#), for example) – regarding ‘wastage’ of an essential fluid – is particularly relevant for the personality and preoccupations of the FYP Hero. For, his manly vigour derived from his ability to sublimate non-reproductive desire – which may lead to semen wastage – into the service of the nation; it is the constant risk of non-sublimation (represented by the vamp, for example) that was the source of anxiety.

The death of the Five Year Plan Hero was marked both by a loss in faith in the ‘socialist’ state as well as a slow but perceptible move away from the savings orientation of Nehruvian era and towards the possibilities of consumerism. It was also marked by transformations in social relations, including intimacies. The dominant form of Indian masculinity – that which was publicly expressed at least – increasingly came to be located within contexts of both consumer cultures as well as cultures of non-reproductive sexuality. The burden of saving the nation through saving for the nation and the equally serious task of fathering – and being the father – was giving way to a different model of man-hood that was entangled in newer political and cultural economies. I am not, of course, suggesting a causal relationship between economic liberalization and a change in libidinal economies. This is both far too simplistic a perspective. Rather, my gesture is towards contiguous and overlapping contexts. And, as I discuss below, I am not also arguing for linearity in the making of masculine cultures in India such that these have progressed from being less socially liberal to more so. However, I will come to this point – the persistence of the past in the present – later in my discussion of the discourses of masculinity that surrounded India’s current Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Let me, for moment, stay with the consumerist juncture mentioned above.

The 1990s mark a significant decade of change in India. Following its re-election to government in 1980, the Indira Gandhi-led Congress party issued the New Industrial Policy Statement that is seen to be the key to the dramatic changes in the economic sphere that characterized subsequent decades. The Statement focused attention economic ‘liberalisation’ and ‘export-promotion’ as ‘catalysts for faster growth in the coming decades’ ([Dutta, 2004](#); p. 170; see also [Sengupta, 2008](#)). Indira Gandhi’s successor, her son Rajiv, enthusiastically built upon the new economic agenda whereby ‘The main objective of the industrial policy under the Rajiv

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[Gandhi] government was... to encourage economic growth led by the private sector, with the public sector playing more and more a subordinate role' (Dutta, 2004, p. 170). The ferment in the economic sphere found significant echoes in social and cultural spheres, including the rise of a new consumer culture.

Beginning from the late 1990s, and related to the 'opening' up of the economy, Indian public culture was the site of a multitude of representations and discourses that provide glimpses into newer notions of masculinity. A case in point is the culture of masculinity that characterises 'footpath pornography'. By 'footpath pornography', I mean Hindi language booklets that are available all over India. Typically, they are cheap to acquire (with prices ranging from Rs. 10-30) and are poorly printed and bound. They are, as my naming of the genre indicates, most frequently available at make-shift book-stalls that crowd the footpaths surrounding some of the busiest transit areas of the city – such as railways stations and inter-state bus stands – as well as commercial and small-scale industrial localities. The booklets are part of a world of ceaseless circulation: for, their purchasers most frequently acquire them in between, say, catching a bus or a train, and, as commodities, they circulate among men who are themselves vulnerable to frequent changes of employment and residence. Another aspect to their life as circulating commodities is that the publishers frequently disappear, switch trade, and commonly have their material carted away by the police.

While the audience for this material can be varied in terms of class, a very sizable section consists of young men of limited means, quite often living in slums and shanty towns under conditions of great insecurity of tenancy and landholding, and working as factory labour and in a variety of other casual (or 'informal') occupations. Theirs is a world of constant and enforced mobility: changes in market conditions lead to frequent job losses and changes in government land policies lead to evictions from their 'unauthorised' places of residence. Booklet cover photographs often portray European women or versions of westernised Indian women in poses of 'rapture' and 'seduction'. The authorship of the booklets is mostly male. And, given their status as goods that are on public display and hence must be purchased in public, it is men who are also the purchasers.

The booklets address a masculine context that is located within – what might be called – an erotics of consumerist modernity. A wide variety of women jostle for male attention both in visual and narrative forms. Typically, (and as noted above), visual representations consist of European women, or ‘westernised’ Indian women. There is the relationship here with Indian cinema and the persona of the ‘vamp’, the most famous of whom was Helen, the Anglo-Indian actress who was famous for her ‘western’ dance numbers. Helen constituted a displacement of Indian male desire: a western looking woman who was the focus of transitory desires that could not be directed at the ‘traditional’ Indian woman. The Indian woman was the object of a more permanent desire for domesticity whereas the western woman embodied a desire that was fleeting: she was more suitable as mistress and girlfriend.

One of the most significant thematic strands within footpath pornography concerns the male desire for the ‘modern’ woman. In an age of hyper-consumerism, the desire for the active and consumerist woman is also a desire to take part more intensively in the cultures of consumerism. Her deep modernity is the site of an intense erotic charge as well as threat. It concerned the following question: ‘How to consume modern sexuality and yet remain in control of one’s masculinity?’

The subaltern masculine cultures of the footpath booklets are embedded within an erotics of modernity that is both the grounds of aspiration as well as a context of masculine fear of losing control. The erotics of modernity is characterised by the scattering of desire across a number of material and symbolic registers. The thread that connects these is the intense engagement with worlds that become erotic through their apparent inaccessibility. This, in turn, conjures the figure of the subaltern male who desires, is chastised by, and fears the object of his desire (the ‘modern’ woman). Maleness is made in this crucible of seeking control and encountering rebuff.

Modi-Masculinity

In this final section, I bring together the various strands of my discussion in order to suggest and foreground a non-linear history of Indian masculinity. The focus of my discussion is ‘Modi-masculinity’, a term I use to refer to the swirl of discourses that characterised the election strategy of Narendra

Modi who attained the office of prime minister in the Indian general elections of 2014. Modi-masculinity, I suggest, is the site of a combination of both the territorialised nationalism of the FYP Hero as well as that of his consumerist antithesis. What is new is the recuperation and braiding of the past with features of the present and, hence, the collapsing of past time and present time.

We can analyse the 2014 general elections as a rich and prolix context for a focussed elaboration of the otherwise dispersed popular discourses on masculinity. The deployment of what could be identified as ‘traditional’ masculinity politics as a significant electoral strategy was as unprecedented as the role of the media during the elections. It was, however, the imbrication of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ that made the elections unlike anything in the past.

The elections were significant for the significant investments made by political parties for campaigning through various media. The dividends of such investment were recognised slightly earlier during the famous 2011 anti-corruption campaign led by an ex-bureaucrat, Arvind Kejriwal. Kejriwal and his team successfully utilised traditional electronic as well as social media to garner massive support. Soon after joining Twitter in November 2011, Kejriwal gathered a following of 1.5 million. In 2012, he launched the Aam Admi Party (AAP) which gained unprecedented success in the state elections in Delhi in 2013, with Kejriwal becoming chief minister of Delhi till his resignation in February 2014. In the 2014 general elections, media management played an even greater role, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that swept into power by a massive majority deploying a sophisticated and massively funded campaign that centred upon its publicly declared prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi. Modi was quick to set up his own website and establish a twitter account. Of particular importance was his projected image in mainstream print and electronic media

A significant aspect of the media discourse that gathered around Narendra Modi focused on his ‘forceful’ masculinity. Modi’s election campaign – as well as popular discourse that surrounded his pre-prime ministerial persona – significantly focused upon his ‘manly’ leadership style: efficient, dynamic, potent and capable, through sheer force of personality, of overcoming the ‘policy-paralysis’ that had putatively

afflicted the previous regime. In this, Modi was explicitly counterpoised to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of the , his ‘impotent’ predecessor, and more generally against an ‘effeminate’ Indian type who is unable to strike hard at both external enemies (Pakistan and China, say) and internal threats (‘Muslim terrorists’, most obviously). This aspect was reinforced by the metonymic invocation by the BJP’s publicity machine of Modi’s ‘56 inch chest’ – able and willing to bear the harshest burdens in the service of ‘Mother India’ – that gained massive currency through the media.

The following statement by fashion writer Shefalee Vasudev exemplifies the recognition that Modi’s image has been specifically crafted for the media:

If we can read nationalism in Modi’s dressing, Obama’s look is about accessible glamour, just as Kennedy’s was about spirited decadence. If Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi was the most garishly dressed politician in the world, former French first lady Carla Bruni was about Parisian sophistication and nonchalant sexiness. Each made a different statement. (Vasudev, 2014, n.p.)

The recognition that masculinity was a significant aspect of Narendra Modi’s media image was recognised in specific ways. A blogger pointed out that

Modi’s Empire Line is most flattering to himself — of opulent turbans adorned with pearls and feathers,...chariots of gold and chrome, a machismo swagger with his self-proclaimed ‘chappan chatti’ (56 inch chest), giant cut-outs in every street, to 3-D virtual images that walks, talks and eats; mammoth road shows of pomp and pageantry; flashy showmanship and stagecraft at public meetings; it’s an intoxicating cocktail of hyper masculinity, virility and potency. Good Grief, Narendrabhai [Brother Narendra] does sound like a Mughal Emperor in Modern India! (Gopinath, 2014, n.p.)

Further, as sociologist and media-commentator Shiv Vishwanathan noted,

Originally Modi appeared in the drabness of white kurtas, which conveyed a swadeshi [indigenous] asceticism. Khadi [hand-spun cloth,

championed by Mahatma Gandhi] is the language for a certain colourlessness. Modi realized that ascetic white was an archaic language. His PROs forged a more colourful Modi, a Brand Modi more cheerful in blue and peach, more ethnic in gorgeous red turbans. ...Hair transplants and Ayurvedic advice served to grow his hair. ...He senses he has to sustain himself as both icon and image of a different era. (Vishwanathan, 2013, p.54)

The political valence of media discourses of Modi-masculinity was recognised by his opponents through their efforts to dispute it: little by little they cast their criticism in terms of his claims to ‘real’ manhood. Hence, in October 2013, a member of the Congress party (that led the political coalition then in power) told a Hindi newspaper that Modi could never become prime-minister as he had not married (though married, Modi has lived separately from his wife) and hence lacked ‘manhood, and in February 2014, TV news-reports showed leading Congress politician Salman Khurshid referring to Modi as ‘napunsak’ (impotent) for not putting a stop to anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002. ‘Masculinity’ came to be invoked to describe both Modi’s personal and political choices.

What I suggest here is that though couched in the language of ‘traditional’ – and corporeal – manhood, Modi-masculinity is, in fact, a recension in a time of consumerist modernity and that the media was a significant site of the re-fashioning. Modi-masculinity stands at the juncture of new consumerist aspirations, the politics of ‘Indian traditions’ and gender, and the re-fashioning of non-upper caste identities. Some idea of the ‘new-ness’ (and peculiarity) Narendra Modi’s mediated image can be derived from the fact that his masculinity was, in fact, counterpoised to that of a political opponent (Manmohan Singh) whose ethnic identity as a Sikh should have positioned him in the ranks of the ‘martial races’ (Omissi, 1991).

Modi-masculinity is a specific effect in the times of consumerist modernity. While borrowing ideas of the strong father and the traditionalist male from pre-national and nationalist discourses, its peculiar characteristic lies in the judicious presentation of Indian manhood as both deeply national (and hence territorialised) but also global (and de-territorialised). And, subsequently, it offers a model of ‘choice’ that is based around the notion of – what could be called – ‘moral consumption’. Within this, there is no

condemnation of consumption as ‘illegitimate’ grounds of identity (cf. [van Wessel, 2004, p.104](#)) or emphases on the ‘morality’ of savings-behaviour ([Srivastava, 2006](#)). Rather, the key concern is with ‘appropriate’ participation in consumerist activities. This has been the most significant manner in which Modi-masculinity has found articulation in the media.

There are two specific contexts that are important for a fuller engagement with the meanings of Modi-masculinity. These are ‘post-nationalism’ and, what I have referred to above as ‘moral consumption’. These concepts (or contexts) also allow for an understanding of the two (or, at least two) specific constituencies of Modi-masculinity that consist of territorialised and de-territorialised Indians. The former consists of older and newer (or, in Modi’s terms, ‘neo’) middle classes, whereas the latter refers to the Indian diaspora. Firstly, post-nationalism is the articulation of the nationalist emotion with the robust desires engendered through new practices of consumerism and their associated cultures of privatization and individuation. It indexes a situation where it is no longer considered a betrayal of the dreams of ‘nation-building’ to either base individual subjectivity within an ethic of consumption (as opposed to savings), or think of the state’s statism in a context of ‘co-operation’ with private capital (as encapsulated by public-private-partnerships, say). The second term, moral consumption, concerns a civilizational debate that seeks to accommodate older social identities – wife, mother, husband, son, sister, for example – within newer individualizing tendencies of consumerism. It does not constitute a rejection – or critique – of consumption (cf. [van Wessel, 2004](#); [Lim Chua, 2014](#)), but rather, an attempt to locate the new forms of subjectivities (individualism) within existing social structures. Hence, in a parallel discussion, I have suggested ([Srivastava, 2011](#)) that the commoditization of religious and ritual contexts allows for the situation where women can be both hyper-consumers (subjects of the world) as well as ‘good’ wives (able to return home to ‘tradition’).

Modi-masculinity stands at the cross-roads of post-nationalism and moral consumption and, in this, combines the continuing imperatives of long-standing power structures and relations of deference with newer political economies of neo-liberalism. That is to say, it combines the idea of an Indian essence with the notion of global comity. Modi-masculinity is, in the most obvious way, the counterpoint to the figure of the ‘Five-Year Plan

Hero' (Srivastava, 2006) in as much as the former 'transcends' both territorially defined notions of national identity and disavows 'savings' in favour of consuming as an act of citizenship. In as much as Modi-masculinity presents the case for a dominant (and domineering) male figure who can forcefully champion the cause of 'minimum government, maximum governance' (one of Narendra Modi's favourite election slogans), he speaks to a middle class constituency that has, in recent times, sought to disengage from state mechanisms (Jaffrelot 2008) in favour of private enterprise. Simultaneously, in severing the link between national identity and national territory – through the emphasis on consumption rather than savings – Modi-masculinity also addresses a diasporic audience. What is crucial in both cases is the irreducible nature of masculine power articulated through 'Modi-ness'. It gestures at and seeks to overturn historical 'emasculatation' – the putative social inability to deal with internal and external 'threats' and the economic inability to be seen as 'global' through disenfranchisement from the world of consumption – through discourses of gendered power.

Modi-masculinity offers both the possibilities of worldliness but also the promise that men might continue to maintain their hold on both the home and the world. For, Modi's right-wing Hindu nationalist politics is strongly associated with the defence of 'Indian values'. Hence, within Modi's world view, while both men and women are offered equal chances of becoming consumers, masculine anxieties over female consumption – the woman as the sacrificing figure who facilitated male consumption rather than consumed herself has been a long-standing cultural discourse – are assuaged through Modi's 'strong' masculinity. He takes part in the world of consumption while simultaneously gesturing that the world of 'tradition' will not be effaced. He is the advocate of moral consumption: consumption is good as long as it 'appropriate' to the Indian cultural context. In this way, Modi-masculinity, while aligned to an emerging discourse of 'Enterprise Culture' (Gooptu, 2014) is not quite neo-liberalism's 'self-regulating, autonomous' individual (Gooptu, 2014, p.12) spoken of in analyses of neo-liberalism in the West. What we have, instead, is individualised subject who is encouraged to make (his) own enterprise, though not exactly as he pleases but through the dictates of structures such as the family and kin networks. It is entirely proper, then, that recent television advertisements

for personal insurance – a significant index of ‘subjectivity and sociality and neoliberal financing’ (Patel, 2006, p. 29) – present the high-achieving (and enterprising) child purchasing a policy not for himself, but for his ageing parents.

Conclusion

This article has sought to provide an account of Indian masculine cultures as a history of Indian modernity and its multiple registers. More specifically, the article has sought to outline this history through an account of relationships between economic, political and social contexts, thereby seeking to blur the boundaries between these aspects. The article also seeks to point out that while there are continuities between the (colonial) past and the (post-colonial) present, the manner in which the past is utilised for the purposes of the present relates to the performances and contexts in the present. The anthropologist Edward Bruner speaks of the manner in which performances ‘re-fashion’ reality. ‘It is in the performance’, as he puts it, ‘that we re-experience, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture ... the performance itself is constitutive’ (1986, p.11). That is to say, my analysis of Indian masculine cultures has sought to outline the significance of the present in constituting the present. Finally, the discussion has sought to present a methodological argument: that accounts of masculinities are required to stitch together narratives that emerge out of multiple social and cultural sites. If we are to view the masculine subject as constituted through discourses that appear at different sites – the law, cinema, domesticity, religion, science, nationalism, consumerism, neo-liberalism, say – then our analytical frameworks must be sufficiently expansive to incorporate these varying modalities of subject formation. For, masculinity is no identity in itself and multi-sited analysis is crucial to the task of locating it as an affect – and an exercise of power – that is produced through a number of social worlds.

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