

India’s culture of toxic masculinity

Violent masculinity is oppressive, exacerbates social conflict and is incompatible with democracy



Three images of social violence have haunted me recently. The first was that of a minor girl in her teens, beaten mercilessly by a village elder. Her crime? She dared elope with her young lover. Second, after the acquittal of all six men accused of lynching Pehlu Khan, TV channels replayed the visuals in which a crowd of men participated gleefully in the atrocity. The third was of three Dalits being thrashed over allegations of theft. The barbarity of this violence can hardly escape anyone, but equally striking is the absence of any woman among the perpetrators. This theatre of cruelty has an all-male cast.

Of course, women perpetrate violence too: they can be aggressive and brutal, particularly to other women. But undoubtedly, the culture that stokes such violence smacks of machismo. Though not solely responsible for such violence, this culture plays a central role in its recurrence, justification, and glorification.

Scholars have drawn attention to the fact that ideas of masculinity are tied less to the body and more to socio-cultural ideologies and practices. Manhood is not naturally given but is a goal to be achieved. To be born a boy is a privilege but one that can be lost if one is not properly initiated into masculine practices. Besides, male adults must maintain this privilege by regular performance. They must demonstrate that they are real men, manly, rather than womanly men. And what better way of doing so than by good, solid walloping? If one ceases to perform these masculine acts or gives up beliefs that constitute them, one slips out of manhood and becomes effeminate.

Model of manhood
What are the core features of this model of manhood? First, aggression is natural and desirable in men. A ‘real’ man is eager to pick up a fight. If he does not, he is told to wear bangles on his wrist. Even the slightest intrusion in his physical, mental or social space is unacceptable. Second,



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men must be tough – muscular and unemotional; they must not be easily perturbed, must not grieve and cry. I am reminded of a Latin American friend who told me that he loved the drama and action in Hindi films but, confronted with the hero’s androgynous features, was perplexed: “Why do they cry so easily?” Relatedly, it is uncharacteristic of men to adopt the point of view of others, show empathy and understanding, gentleness and compassion. Part of what it means to be tough is to suppress empathy towards others, to be embarrassed by fear or any other vulnerability.

Third, men must be ambitious and ruthless. Once they set a goal, it must be achieved regardless of consequences to others. Since winning is all-important, other men striving to achieve the same goal are rivals to be eliminated. Extreme competitiveness, on this model, is a classical male characteristic. Fourth, it does not behoove men to consult others, negotiate with the weak, or settle for anything less than what they want. They take independent decisions that brook no questioning. As famously put by Amitabh Bachchan in one of his films, ‘*Bas... keh diya na (Enough, I have said so).*’ Once a man speaks, it is final; an order to be obeyed blindly. Men are sovereign, free and autonomous, in control of the world they inhabit, the women they rule over and the children they beget. In short, part of their freedom lies in having dominion over others, particularly women and ‘servants’.

All these must be contrasted to features that inhere in women: being irrational, bereft of self-restraint, crying easily, emotional, empathetic but lacking judgment and impartiality.

Women are physically and mentally weak, and therefore must be dependent on and protected by their male superiors. It follows that when men display such traits, they become weak, soft, wimpish. Acting like a woman is a betrayal of manhood. Cold-blooded violence shows the opposite: that manliness is fully alive and kicking!

Masculinity against freedom
Another key feature exhibited through images of social violence, and integral to a culture of masculinity, is the belief that ‘real men’ are directly responsible for sustaining a moral order. Its guardians, they must restore that order when it is disturbed. Since the girl had violated the honour of the community, she deserved the severe punishment meted out publicly and directly by an older, wiser man of the same community. How else can her subjection within the social order be conserved? Likewise, Dalits and cultural aliens (Muslims) must know their designated place in society. Any attempt to become equal must be put down. How dare a Dalit sport a moustache or dream of riding a horse? He must be shown his place. To men with such ideas of masculinity, the argument that they must not take law in their own hands falls on deaf ears. This is unsurprising, because from their own perspective, the law must be broken if it breaches the more fundamental moral order.

It is hard for me to assess the extent to which Indians are outraged by masculine violence. Are we unable to prevent this violence? Can’t be bothered to stop it? Or do we secretly endorse it? The very best in traditional and modern India, in their own dis-

tinctive ways, avoided the pernicious binary at the heart of this male-centric world. For the Buddha, compassion was not a feminine virtue but a key moral value for all humans. Mahavira tried to inculcate the ethical significance of *ahimsa* not merely towards all humans but every living species. Asoka realised the futility of social and political violence and advocated harmonious coexistence among different religio-philosophical groups. The early Dharmasutras proposed that knowledge is not the exclusive preserve of professionally learned men (Brahmins); much can be learnt from women and those falling low in status-hierarchy. In our times, Gandhi showed how peaceful resistance against the oppressor can be more effective than violent confrontation. But in the world of violent masculinities, these are unmanly attributes fit only for women and the weak.

Real freedom for all is the heartbeat of the order envisaged by those who sought independence from colonial rule. But the central feature in the culture of toxic masculinity is domination, which is deeply incompatible with a freedom-sensitive, egalitarian ethic. Why then does an archaic, conservative, masculine moral order, sustained largely by aggressive and violent men, persist and continue to find support among aspiring sections of our society?

It is perplexing too that social violence is continually reproduced in a democracy. Democracies are meant to encourage the not-so-masculine values of consultation, negotiation, discussion, compromise; to accept that we might not get all that we want, that it is one thing to show strength, firmness, courage and quite another to be self-obsessed and obstinate, to posture belligerently, to bully the vulnerable. In peaceful, functional democracies, people have the quiet confidence that they will defend themselves against aggression, but they know equally well that there is nothing particularly heroic about violence. The greatest Indians have defied male stereotypes, refused to be trapped by the male/female binary. Will today’s Indians follow them, reduce violence, and secure freedom for all?

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A judicial overreach into matters of regulation

A PIL on Aadhaar sheds light on some problematic trends



The Madras High Court has been hearing a PIL petition since 2018 that initially asked the court to declare the linking of Aadhaar with a government identity proof as mandatory for registering email and social media accounts. The petitioners, victims of online bullying, went to the court because they found that law enforcement agencies were inefficient at investigating cybercrimes, especially when it came to gathering information about pseudonymous accounts on major online platforms. This case brings out some of the most odious trends in policymaking in India.

The first issue is how the courts, as Anuj Bhunia has argued in the book *Courting the People*, have continually expanded the scope of issues considered in PILs. In this case, it is absolutely clear that the court is not pondering about any question of law. In what could be considered as abrogation of the separation of powers provision in the Constitution, the Madras High Court started to deliberate on a policy question with a wide-ranging impact: Should Aadhaar be linked with social media accounts?

After ruling out this possibility, it went on to consider a question that is even further out of its purview: Should platforms like WhatsApp that provide encrypted services allow forms of “traceability” to enable finding the originator of content? In essence, the court is now trying to regulate one particular platform on a very specific technical question, ignoring legal frameworks entirely. It is worrying that the judiciary is finding itself increasingly at ease with deliberations on policy and regulatory measures, and its recent actions remind us that the powers of the court also deserve critical questioning.

Government’s support
Second, not only are governments failing to assert their own powers of regulation in response to the courts’ actions, they are on the contrary encouraging such PILs. The Attorney General, K.K. Venugopal, who is representing the State of Tamil Nadu in the case, could have argued for the case’s dismissal by referring to the fact that the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has already published draft regulations that aim to introduce “traceability” and to increase obli-

gations on social media platforms. Instead, he has largely urged the court to pass regulatory orders.

Third, ‘Aadhaar linking’ is becoming increasingly a refrain whenever any matter even loosely related to identification or investigation of crime is brought up. While the Madras High Court has ruled out such linking for social media platforms, other High Courts are still hearing petitions to formulate such rules. The processes that law enforcement agencies use to get information from platforms based in foreign jurisdictions rely on international agreements. Linking Aadhaar with social media accounts will have no bearing on these processes. Hence, the proposed ‘solution’ misses the problem entirely, and comes with its own threats of infringing privacy.

Problems of investigation
That said, investigating cybercrime is a serious problem for law enforcement agencies. However, the proceedings before the court indicate that the cause of the issues have not been correctly identified. While legal provisions that allow agencies to seek information from online platforms already exist in the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Information Technology Act, getting this information from platforms based in foreign jurisdictions can be a long and cumbersome process. For instance, the hurdles posed by the mutual legal assistance treaty between India and the U.S. effectively mean that it might take months to receive a response to information requests sent to U.S.-based platforms, if a response is received at all.

To make cybercrime investigation easier, the Indian government has various options. India should push for fairer executive agreements possible under instruments like the United States’ CLOUD Act, for which we need to first bring our surveillance laws in line with international human rights standards through reforms such as judicial oversight. India could use the threat of data localisation as a leverage to negotiate bilateral agreements with other countries to ensure that agencies have recourse to quicker procedures. As a first step, however, Indian courts must wash their hands of such questions. For its part, the Centre must engage in consultative policymaking around these important issues, rather than support ad-hoc regulation through court orders in PILs.

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Talking trade with the EU

Why it is important for India to hasten talks with the EU on a free trade agreement

MOHAN KUMAR & CONSTANTINO XAVIER

As the economy begins to suffer from the U.S.-China trade war, it is imperative for India to pursue a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union (EU). Last month, negotiators from both sides met in Brussels, for more talks about talks, but time is now running out for New Delhi.

Moving beyond the U.S. and China, this is the right time for India to engage the EU as an indispensable democratic partner to craft a favourable geo-economic order. A series of economic and geo-strategic factors make the need for an economic deal with the EU more urgent.

First, India risks being left behind amidst a collapsing global trade architecture, rising protectionism and a new emphasis on bilateral FTAs. India is the only major power lacking an FTA with any of its top trade partners, including the EU, the U.S., China and Gulf economies. This situation is not tenable as most trade is now driven either by FTAs or global value chains.

The EU’s revived focus on FTAs could only exacerbate this risk for India. In June, Brussels concluded a trade deal with Vietnam and a historic FTA with the Mercosur countries in South America. India, in the meantime, is hanging on to its Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status. Its status under the EU’s Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) will face rising competition from Pakistan or Sri Lanka, who enjoy GSP+ benefits.

Stuck in a ‘grey zone’
Stuck in a ‘grey zone’, without preferential FTA tariffs or GSP+ status, India will struggle to keep exports competitive for Europe, its largest trade partner where 20% of its exports land up.

The good news here is that India’s talks with the EU have been advancing slowly but steadily. From agriculture to intellectual property, the EU and India have quietly been exchanging and aligning views. New areas like e-commerce have registered signifi-

cant convergence because India’s position on data privacy is not that different from the EU’s. As with the EU-Japan deal, India may wish to proceed at two speeds: it could delay discussions about free flow of data for a few years and freeze differences on the tax moratorium issue or data localisation, even while committing to liberalise in other areas.

Second, beyond mere economic cost-benefit analysis, India must also approach an EU FTA from a geo-strategic perspective. With Mr. Trump’s hostile spotlight focussing on India, and lingering concerns about the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, New Delhi must realise the long-term strategic benefits of a trade deal with Europe.

Democratic regulations

EU negotiators are now more willing to make concessions on labour or en-

vironmental regulations, which used to be insurmountable obstacles. The collapse of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and concerns about excessive economic reliance on China have propelled the EU to become a little more pragmatic, which New Delhi should leverage before it’s too late.

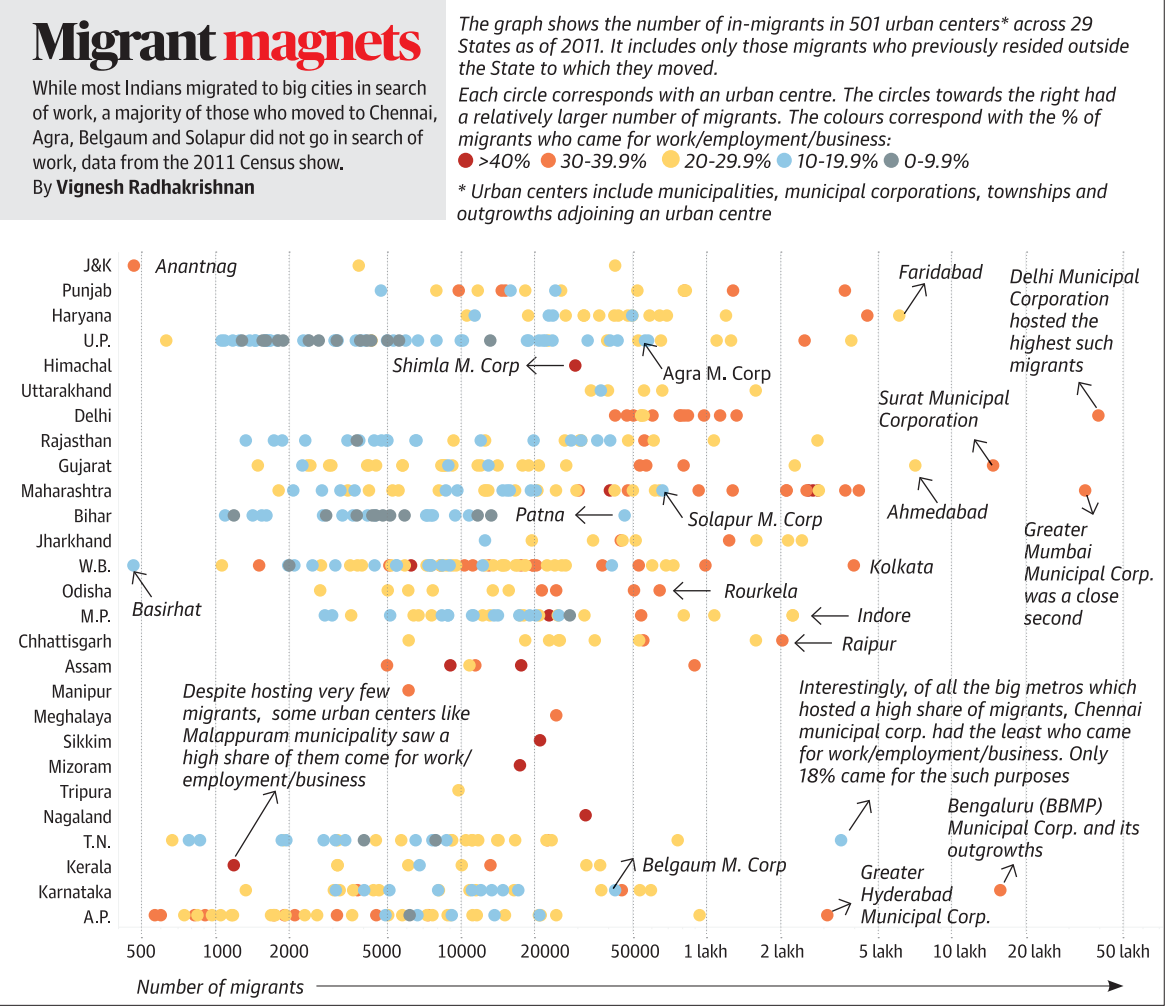
The EU also offers India a unique regulatory model that balances growth, privacy and standards. India’s governance framework shares the European norms of democratic transparency and multi-stakeholder participation on a variety of new technological domains, from regulating artificial intelligence to 5G networks. New Delhi must see this as a strategic premium that is not accounted for in a strict cost-benefit economic analysis.

When New Delhi speaks of Europe as a strategic partner to uphold a multipolar order, it must go beyond security and begin with the business of trade and technology.

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DATA POINT



The **Hindu.**
FROM THE ARCHIVES
FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 27, 1969

The morning after
(From an Editorial)

The Congress Working Committee’s two resolutions form no doubt an anti-climax to the tense political drama staged over the last few weeks, first at Bangalore and then at New Delhi. But the dissipation of the crisis that they have brought about will be received with a sense of relief by all those who were anxious that the party should not break up. Few will disagree with the Working Committee that “a split in the party will have calamitous consequences.” It is this consideration that must have weighed most with both the warring groups, and particularly with the old guard which has had to do more of the climb-down. The most disappointed with the outcome seem to be the Marxists one of whose leaders has hastened to voice his utter disappointment by castigating the resolutions as “hypocritical”. The impossible compromise has surely baulked their ambitions to exploit the vulnerability of a hopelessly divided Congress Party. This threat looked so real, as the party crisis seemed at one stage to reach a point of no return, that the sudden caving in of the old guard at the last minute may also be accounted for by it.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 27, 1919.
Fall of Lenin.

Copenhagen, August 24. - Doctor Martiny, head of the Danish Red Cross, who has arrived from Russia, interviewed by Reuter said that, Lenin decided early in 1919 to abandon terroristic methods and adopt a conciliatory attitude, in external and internal relations, with a view to attaining a peaceful settlement. This policy failed, whereupon the Soviets espoused the extremist methods of Peters and Dershisky, who have been the real Government for the past three months. The successes against Koltchak were largely due to the able Generalship of a supporter of Peters, named Kameneff, an ex-Czarist Colonel, who adopted an offensive instead of a defensive policy. Martiny believes that the Soviet would be overthrown in six months, if an Allied and Neutral Commission were attached to Koltchak and Denikin’s forces, in order to guard against excesses. The Russians, except Bolsheviks, would welcome the British intervention. People would give up hope, if the British were to withdraw from Archangle, as Russia would inevitably fall under German influence.