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Changing men

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They are drops in an ocean of dominant norms, but some men also do question the roles thrust on them by society.

Men are considered weak and ineffectual if they cannot demonstrate male "strengths".

Photo: R.V. Moorthy



Rethinking gender roles: Men are beginning to come out of patriarchal moulds.

This has been a season of medals — gold, silver and bronze. Men and women, strong and beautiful, have competed as never before. And for a brief moment, the problems around us have evaporated as all of us, regardless of nationality, have basked in the reflected glory of this international bunch of achievers — from tiny Jamaica to the mighty United States of America and China.

The dust will soon settle, the stadia will fall silent, and the achievers and the voyeurs will return to their daily lives. Has something changed in all of us through such an effort? Or are the basics of life and our attitudes untouched by progress on the sporting field, or in the economy or elsewhere?

Incremental change

I would like to believe that there is change. That we should celebrate every little effort at changing entrenched customs and attitudes. And that in the end all this will add up to something.

Last week a friend got married. It was a Hindu wedding. But the person conducting it was a woman. So was her assistant. The ceremony was simple, dignified and participatory. For many of us it was the first time we had witnessed such a ceremony conducted by women. The women priests told me that they and their kin had been conducting religious ceremonies for over two decades now, in Pune and some other parts of Maharashtra. When they began there was opposition. Today, no one questions.

This is only one of several instances we know of where women have broken through stereotypes and roles set for them. Recently, there was a news item in a Bangalore newspaper about women being a part of a Brahmin "thread ceremony" that had remained an exclusive male domain. Not long ago, the Army agreed that women had the right to join the forces as equals. There are scores more of such examples of change. Two or three decades back, none of this would have been considered possible in this country. Yet, it is happening.

We can be cynical and dismiss all this as exceptions that do not reflect the reality of the majority of Indian women. Absolutely true. They do not. Being a woman in India, particularly if you are poor and belong to a lower caste, is not a happy prospect. Despite this depressing reality, however, we can look on these and other developments as small, perhaps faltering, steps towards change.

Yet, while women are breaking new ground almost every day, we hear little about men who are breaking out of moulds. If women feel that they are forced into stereotypes, what about men? Are they not expected always to be strong, hard-working, aggressive, earn money for the family etc? These are roles forced on men by society and any man wanting to break away from these expectations faces ostracism and is considered less than a man. As a result, many men suppress parts of their personalities, often the more creative parts, because they feel they must conform.

I was encouraged, therefore, to come across a book *Breaking the Moulds: Indian Men Look at Patriarchy Looking at Men*. Published last year by Books for Change, *Breaking the Moulds*, by Ravindra R.P., Harish Sadani, Geetali V.M. and Mukund S.N., contains a series of articles, interviews and essays mainly by men. Most of them are translations from a Marathi publication that is published each year around Diwali by an organisation in Pune called Purush Uvach (Men Speak) and Mumbai-based MAVA (Men Against Violence and Abuse).

Simple and honest

The book has articles by men who have been the caregivers for women in their families, fathers who write about the joys of bringing up a daughter, men who speak of the challenge of coming to terms with their sexuality. Many of the stories are simply written without complex theorising.

In their words, the book is attempting to break the “myth of masculinity as a monolithic construct and brings out the diversity, complexity, pain and richness of experiences of men who are attempting to break out of patriarchal moulds.” Above all, what comes through is the earnestness of the writers as also their genuine desire not to conform to any stereotype laid down for what is acceptable and correct male behaviour. It is rare to come across a book like this in India.

One of the organisations responsible for this book is MAVA. I can recall when MAVA came into being more than a decade back. Not many took it seriously. It seemed maverick. A few “gendered” men trying to break the norms laid down by society for men.

Men who believed that change in them would go a long way in checking the abuse and violence that women have to suffer in our society. Men who stated that their vision was to have “a gender-just society — where men and women live in harmony and with self-respect, by providing spaces for mutual growth and well-being”.

Burden of expectations

Look at this against the background of the overwhelming media images of the strong, aggressive, macho male — although there was a brief period when the feminine side of men was acknowledged and even celebrated in some advertising. But the dominant image remains the same.

Men are considered weak and ineffectual if they cannot demonstrate male “strengths”. And even though much has changed in terms of women’s status, these overwhelming expectations continue to burden the men who want to be different. Often, men face as lonely a battle at breaking away from stereotypes as do women.

Organisations like MAVA and Purush Uvach are drops in this large ocean of dominant norms. But just as women have chipped away at all-male domains and opened up for themselves and future generations of women greater opportunities and altered some gender stereotypes, men too are beginning to question accepted societal norms for male behaviour and roles.

They are taking a chance at being different. And they are acknowledging that in the long-term, there can be no lasting change for women if men also don’t change.