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BE A WOKE MAN

By SOWMYA RAJARAM, Bangalore Mirror Bureau | Updated: Nov 8, 2017, 04.00 AM IST



A film festival will question gender binaries and urge young men to dismantle patriarchy

All the reason, logic and emotive realities in the world can't change someone's mind. Which is what Harish Sadani, gender-activist and co-founder of Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA), Mumbai discovered when a girl who had watched *A Pinch of Skin*, a film on female gender mutilation, at one of the film festivals MAVA had organised, came up to him and tried to justify the practice. "She said that there must be some purpose to the practice, even after watching such a sensitive film," he recalls. Later, her parents spoke to the principal and complained about why such a film was shown to their ward. What stayed with Sadani, however, was that it meant she had gone home and talked about it with her parents. "It was a result of self-reflection and thinking." And that is what he hopes to achieve with *Sama-bhav*, a two-day travelling film festival on themes on gender, masculinity and relationships, that will come to Bengaluru on November 10 and 11.

In collaboration with Jain University and Namma Pride, it will feature 13 films (feature, short and documentary, from Canada, US, Yemen, India and Afghanistan), and will also have panel discussions with experts. The festival will be held in 12 locations from October 2017 to February 2018.

For 24 years, MAVA has been engaging young men in schools, colleges and communities in conversations around sexual health and gender-sensitive behavior. The festival is an extension of that, Sadani says. He hopes to create a ripple effect, seeding personal changes in the lives of those who attend, and inspiring them to work for the cause.

The world, Sadani believes, needs to move beyond gender binaries. That has been the cornerstone of his work – building awareness of and having conversations around gender

intersectionality. Often, the many groups working for marginalised and disadvantaged communities – for example, women and LGBTQIA – work in silos. “We need a forum where each gender expresses solidarity towards the other. That is very rare. I would have loved to see more heterosexual people, for instance, celebrating the reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code,” he says. “And because patriarchy is so pervasive, it reinforces toxic ideas of masculinity. Educating men, therefore, is the most challenging task. It requires them to examine their own outlook, and know that the way they have been told to behave is not a function of gender, but is learned behaviour; is social engineering.”

A film festival such as this, he believes, will help young men see themselves as disadvantaged by patriarchy too, and make them part of the solution, instead of talking about gender violence as just a woman’s problem. “It offers a non-threatening space to talk about their experiences; listen to other viewpoints and get exposure; understand gender with all complexities and intersectionalities,” Sadani says.

The films chosen reflect this mindset. Daaravtha/The Threshold (meaning ‘threshold’ in Marathi) tells the story of a young boy of 12-13, trying to understand his sexuality, and the fact that he has a crush on an older boy. His mother, who is herself trying to liberate herself from the shackles of patriarchy, is a confidante. Khel Badal is a set of six short films by Video Volunteers, filmed in diverse locations and among diverse communities, on dismantling the patriarchy. “The films ask questions about menstruation taboos, and women are expected to fast for men, but not vice versa, for instance,” Sadani explains. A film such as Mina Walking looks at life for a girl in Kabul after the Taliban. Yuva Maitri showcases MAVA’s work over the years, while The Mask You Live In looks at how gun culture in America is encouraging young people to resort to violence.

Speakers such as Ammu Joseph, Vinay Chandran, Shilok Mkatti and Priyanka Divaakar will offer rich perspective, dismantling notions of patriarchy and gender, and igniting conversations around the subject.

The pressure on boys not to cry; the experience of many girls who have had to give up sports because of societal expectations – all these are anecdotes that young audiences have shared with him after watching the films. With the festival, Sadani hopes to encourage more such personal reflection. After all, change doesn’t take place in a day.

Sama-bhav, 10am-6pm on November 10-11, at School of Commerce Auditorium, Jain University, 9th Block, Jayanagar. The event is open to everyone, but you will need to register. Email samabhavfilmfest@gmail.com or log on to facebook.com/samabhavfilmfestival