

EMANCIPATION

"Duran Poli is the only thing I can't make," says Sunil Chachar regretfully, recounting how, at his last NSS camp, he insisted that he be allowed to make the last batch of 50 rotis. Twenty-year-old Sunil isn't training to be a chef. He works on the fields, just like others in Jejuri, a small town in Maharashtra. But he's one of the 17 boys whose lives have been changed by Yuva Maitri, a programme aimed at redefining masculinity.

Sunil is unapologetically non-macho. When his relatives taunt him for doing 'women's work', he says, "Taste my tea. Isn't it better than what any woman has made?" At the NSS camp, Sunil volunteered to undergo the punishment reserved for undisciplined boys, i.e. washing utensils. "I was hoping at least my friends would be influenced by me."

Sunil's influence has spread beyond friends. Confident that he could change them the way Yuva Maitri changed him, Sunil requested his college principal to give him two months to work on a group of boys who were to be rusticated for rowdiness. He also requested his female friends to start talking to these boys. Within a month, one of them had attended an NSS camp where he was nominated 'Ideal Student'. "That was for me the real certificate of having passed the course," smiles Sunil.

Perhaps the one who has benefited the most from the new Sunil is his mother. After initial protests, she now savours her new-found freedom. She can actually go out, knowing her son will do the cooking, and when she does cook, it's no longer a chore, for he helps her.

Likewise, Ganesh Phule's sister reaped the advantages of Yuva Maitri. The family had found a groom for her when Ganesh started attending the workshops. Under his gentle prodding, the pliant girl realised she didn't really like the boy. She's now happily engaged to another boy, again found by her parents, but approved by her.

Ganesh has already started working the Yuva Maitri magic on his prospective brother-in-law. But he regrets not being able to convince his father to not foot the wedding bill alone. "All my relatives got angry, saying 'Thanks to you, the first *rishita* was called off; now don't stop this one.' Even my sister told me not to insist. I had to accept my limitation."

So what's Yuva Maitri? A two-year programme conceived by Harish Sadani, founder of Men Against Violence and Abuse, which ended this July. Wanting to work with boys from a rural background, Harish chose six colleges from Pune district to execute the Population Council-funded programme. Thirty-three boys signed up; 17 stayed on for the second year. Workshops on themes like health, gender equality and sexuality were conducted through the first year; in the second, the boys were told to relay what they'd imbibed to their peers.

That didn't always make them popular. Where earlier they had gone along with it, now they started objecting when their friends referred to girls as 'item' or 'cheez'. But what made their peers envious was the new-found popularity of these boys among girls. Like most village boys, none of them had dared to

Defanging the INDIAN MCP

SRISAM VEERANAH



BE A MAN Harish Sadani (top) with his converts

A programme financed by an American NGO trained boys to cook, clean, respect women and spread the gospel of gender equality.

Jyoti Punwani reports

speak to a girl. Suddenly, they found themselves being sought out by those who had till then been objects of both desire and fear. At NSS camps, girls would ask them what their 'males only' course was about. Their wallpapers on issues such as rape, Khairlanji, eve-teasing and anaemia attracted girls. "The people in my village joke: You want to find Amol? He's the guy with the girls," laughs Amol Kale, who, having succeeded in stopping his mother and sister from 'sitting out' during menstruation, is trying to achieve this with his neighbours now.

From menstruation to masturbation, there seem to be no taboos in the discussions their female friends have with them. What's the secret of your success, ask their envious friends. "It's simple," explains Ganesh. "It's our behaviour that makes girls run away from us—the way we ogle them, pass comments, and yet, act so terrified when they talk to us. How can girls feel secure with us?"

Admittedly, the main reason these boys have been able to change their immediate world is

because they are males in a male-dominated system. This irony isn't lost on Ganesh who says, "Since I'm the eldest child, and my father is away working in the city, my mother always listens to me. I took advantage of being the man in the house, though it made me uncomfortable." Again, being men, they are confident that when it comes to marriage, they will be able to change their wives too. Contrast this with the apprehensions girls who develop independent ways of thinking have about how their future husbands will react.

That's one reason feminism is as important for men as it is for women. It's time Yuva Maitri became part of the college curriculum, as Dr K N Bawle, ex-principal, Gramonnati Mandal College, Narayangaon, says. Having encouraged his students to join Yuva Maitri, Bawle feels, "There's never been a programme like this. It changed me too, into organising unconventional college activities. Every college must have a permanent Personality and Life Skills Development Centre run by Yuva Maitri and financed by the UGC."

Distressed city youth bank on helpline for info

Anahita Mukherji | TNN

Mumbai: From loneliness to sexuality, to job stress to information on the nearest AIDS testing centre, Mumbai's youths often find themselves starved of information as they grapple with their own private turmoil, and nobody to share it with. In a bid to provide them with an outlet, Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA)—an organisation that has for long worked on gender equality and sexuality—has set up the Yuva Maitri helpline (022-26826062) for youth, which operates between 10 am and 6 pm every day.

Over two months into the helpline, they have now quantified data on the kind of calls they have received from both men and women.

"A majority of callers (65%), want information on a variety of matters, including legal help, access to gynaecologists, career counsellors and sexologists. Many callers want to know where they could get themselves tested for HIV," said Harish Sadani, one of the founders of MAVA, who has worked closely with the youth in several parts of the state, including Pune, Satara, Kolhapur and Mumbai. "I have found that youth in both urban and rural areas are desperately in need of a platform to express themselves," he said.

About 28% of callers dialled the helpline to discuss issues of sexuality. Two per cent of calls were to discuss apprehensions about marriage, emotional problems,



Bhagvan Das

job stress and doubts about pregnancy. Another 2% called because they were lonely. While 20% of callers were between the ages of 15 and 19, the majority (31%) are between the ages of 20 and 24.

Meet Tara Dnyaneshwar (20), who co-ordinates the helpline, recalls the time he received a call from a young homosexual who was plagued by feelings of guilt over his sexual orientation,

had multiple partners and was unable to maintain a steady relationship. "I explained to him that it was perfectly normal to be homosexual; it was just like a preference for tea over coffee. At the end of the conversation, he said he actually felt lighter for having shared his feelings with someone," said Meet.

Many callers have poured their hearts out over relationships gone sour. One caller spoke of how he hated his mother. He was forced into marriage and never spoke to either his wife or mother.

A teenage girl in Class XII called on the helpline and started weeping. She gradually came out with the story of how she had been betrayed by a friend, and her reputation

lay in tatters. She is one of the few girls who called on the helpline. "Only 5% of the calls we received were from women. This shows that women continue to remain repressed and are often afraid to share their woes, even on an anonymous helpline," said Sadani. Those who are not comfortable calling on a helpline can even send an email on yuvamaitri@rocketmail.com.

Though the helpline is run from Mumbai, there have been a few outstation calls too, from places like Latur, Satara and Kolhapur. Currently, the helpline is manned by 10 volunteers, all of whom juggle their work or their studies with the youth helpline, which they man free of cost. MAVA is in need of more volunteers for the helpline.

College students join hands to redefine 'Mardangi'

The play seeks to interrogate the idea of masculinity and gender stereotypes

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Students from several prominent Mumbai colleges will be performing a play titled Mardangi between January 15 and 16. The play, which will be put on by students from Ruia, Government law college, SIES, will take place at various locations across the city. The play is part of a yearly initiative called 'Redefining Masculinity' by Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA), a social organisation that works for gender equality and the rights of people. Students, as part of this project, will interrogate ideas of masculinity and gender stereotypes through plays, elocution competitions and workshops at thirty colleges across the city.

"When we talk about sexual abuse and harassment, we need to understand where it stems from. Society has enforced on men a lot of expectations—don't cry, be dominant and strong, earn more money than women. This has two hazardous impacts; it squashes the idea of gender equality which leads to more subjugation of women and it pressures men to adhere to these norms. We want to challenge these stereotypes," said Harish Sadhani, Director, MAVA.

Twenty-one-year old Ravi Jaiswal, a first-year student from Nirmala Niketan Institute of Social Work, said, "A lot of organisations that work with women only talk about violence. They do not successfully addressing the root cause of the issue—gender roles in our society. We are taught about human anatomy but we are hardly told about our mental make-up which affects the way we behave."

Aniket Kamble, 16, a first-year student at Kirti College said, "Through these workshops we realised that a lot of women are also unaware on how to speak to their male counterparts on 'intimate' issues. There is also very little conversation on sexuality and that people can be gay and transgender. A



The Men Against Violence and Abuse artists perform the play at Raahgiri Dwarka

lot of awareness has been generated about the idea of masculinity and how it is extremely skewed in society. We all need to introspect." MAVA is expanding to more col-

leges and organisations and is also conducting several competitions where students can share their ideas about gender, sexuality and equality.

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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](https://www.facebook.com/samabhavfilmfestival)