



Making Men A Part Of The Solution: Removing The 'Toxic' From Toxic Masculinity

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Posted by Manasi Marathe

Questioning stereotypes through cultural advocacy

"When I was watching Smita Patil's film 'Nishant', my attention got driven to the male character's role in the film performed by the versatile actor and renowned playwright Girish Karnad. He had played the role of a school teacher who is humble, sensitive and caring to his wife. I was thinking as to how his character was different from how typical men are expected to be in society...." Harish Sadani recounts memories of his college years that moulded his ideas and identity as a man.

From an early age, his inquisitive mind was always filled with questions that challenged the norms of gender and masculinity. Having experienced isolation and jeering by friends and family for not being 'manly enough' as per their notions of masculinity which would often be toxic, Harish Sadani finally saw in Karnad's character a version of masculinity that he could closely connect to. That reel representation provided much clarity and coherence to Harish who was struggling to comprehend the gender spectrum throughout his adolescence.

Harish Sadani's query into the gender roles and masculinity eventually broadened to include gender-based violence. While many people and institutions in India that work on gender-based violence see men as *'part of the problem'*, there are prominent organisations and individuals like Harish who recognise patriarchy as the core of the problem. The phrase *"Personal is political"* couldn't be truer as Harish Sadani started working as a gender rights activist and co-founded **MAVA** (Men Against Violence and Abuse) in 1993.

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MAVA is dedicated to working with men and young boys and transforming them into "partners" and "stakeholders" in a gender equal society.

As a pioneer in the space of gender and masculinity, he has been engaging and mentoring thousands of adolescent boys and young men to address issues of toxic masculinity and gender-based violence, using out-of-the-box methods like street theatre, interactive workshops, travelling film festivals, youth helpline, residential camps,

etc. The organisation is dedicated to working with men and young boys and transforming them into “partners” and “stakeholders” in a gender equal society.

Vigorous cultural advocacy has been a hallmark of MAVA's activism. As part of this cultural advocacy, in 1996, MAVA launched “*Purush Spandana*” which is a Diwali *Anka* – an annual magazine released during the festival of Diwali. The unique literary format of an *Anka* has become an intrinsic part of Maharashtrian culture and tradition for over 100 years. Many well-known Marathi writers and poets have started their careers with their contributions to Diwali *Ankas*. There are more than 300 *Ankas* published by various publication houses across Maharashtra and are based on various themes such as health, sports, cinema, business, women, senior citizens, sexuality, food, education, etc.



The *Purush Spandana* magazine acts as a refreshing portal that shares stories of men and boys and allows them to talk to other men and boys about topics that are shunned under the watchful gaze of patriarchy.

The decision to launch *Purush Spandana* was a deliberate one, Harish Sadani says. It is a humble attempt that hopes to initiate thoughts and conversations in Maharashtrian households on the issues of gender. It is one of the handful of *Ankas* that is dedicated for and by men. The name translates to “Male Vibrations” in Marathi – implying the creative expression which brings to fore a wide array of ideas of masculinity. The magazine acts as a refreshing portal that shares stories of men and

boys and allows them to talk to other men and boys about topics that are shunned under the watchful gaze of patriarchy.

Although the magazine is targeted at men and masculinity, over 33% of the buyers are women. This indicates the need in society for opening a dialogue and a hope for introspection on gender issues. The previous issues were based on special themes associated with relationships; from friendship to sexuality, from family and relationships; caste and relationships to health and relationships; media to breaking of gender binaries.

While majority of the writers are men (cis-het), there is a percentage of women and non-binary individuals whose contributions are also sought over the past few years as Harish Sadani's MAVA believes that men should also be reading and introspecting what women and non-binary persons are expressing. This year in November 2020, *Purush Spandana* marks 25 years of creative engagement with men on the spectrum of masculinity. The current issue focuses on the theme of toxic masculinity and how it impacts relationships (not just man-woman relationships but all human relationships). There are insightful articles on understanding toxic masculinity and its various manifestations through engaging short stories, articles, poems, book reviews, first-person accounts, etc.

"I wish that my Marathi-speaking friends globally would buy a copy of Purush Spandana, strengthen my cause and celebrate Diwali with the determination of removing the toxicity in all our relationships and making our lives more humane, enriching and safer", Harish Sadani signs off with boundless enthusiasm and optimism.

Developing a sense of healthy masculinity through community interventions

While Harish Sadani and his organisation tackles the topic of masculinity head-on by engaging with and mentoring young men and boys on sexuality, consent, gender roles, etc., Dr. Shashikant Ahankari, President of *Health and Auto Learning Organization (HALO) Medical Foundation*, popularly known as **HMF**, looks at it from the lens of holistic social development.

HMF started in 1983 in Andur as a response to the disastrous earthquake in Latur and Osmanabad in Maharashtra. It initially focused on imparting basic medical training to village women to prevent common ailments and provide immediate healthcare facilities to pregnant women. The programme gradually expanded its ambit and started considering healthcare as part of an overall socio-economic development of the entire village.

The women medical volunteers, *Bharat Vaidyas*, as they are called, had an easy and amicable access and presence across the village. They became an important player in driving forces of change throughout the village – be it in the formation of women's Microfinance Self-Help Groups, bringing about ban on liquor, or in the formation of *Saavli Kendra* established in 2002 – a support group for reconciliation, counselling and rehabilitation of victims of violence. It was on the platform of women's economic empowerment that the topic of domestic violence began to get addressed.

"More women started participating in public activities and taking decision-making roles, however, men's mentality remained regressive", Dr Shashikant Ahankari talks about how HMF started counselling for married men. The patriarchal notions of treating a woman as either a goddess or as a prostitute were dismantled in these workshops.



There have been interventions by HMF counsellors in ongoing cases of domestic violence wherein they have worked with the families to identify the reasons and solutions to make sure there is no more violence and bitterness.

The men were asked to an alternative outlook of a '*friend*' for their spouses. Thus *Samajdar Jodidar (Empathetic Spouse) Project* came into being in 2010. It was supported by *UNFPA*. The project had 2 groups, one for boys between the age of 13 to 19, and the other for married men. By asking delicate questions to the participants, by talking in their language, these sessions compelled them to introspect and question the age-old notions of masculinity. The concept of sexuality and its layers, the ideas of friendship and love, and how they are different than mere lust, are being discussed and talked about. Slowly as the participants became vocal about their thoughts on gender roles and masculinity, a lot of things started becoming clear to them on their own. The project also invited parents of the participants to give them insights into these sessions.

There have been interventions by *HMF* counsellors in ongoing cases of domestic violence wherein they have worked with the families to identify the reasons and solutions to make sure there is no more violence and bitterness. The results speak for themselves as there is significant increase in empathy and understanding within couples and their families. These community interventions are a stark contrast to the '*cancel culture*' that seems like an easy way out for cases like this.

Over the years, the project has trained hundreds of men through "*Train-the-Trainer*" model and now it is running completely autonomously by the people in 70 villages in Akkalkot Tuljapur and Lohara districts, in addition to Osmanabad.

Offering possibilities of change through dialogue

MASUM was founded by Dr Manisha Gupte and Dr Ramesh Awasthi in Malshiras in Purandar taluka of Pune district of Maharashtra in 1987. The organisation works to empower marginalised women through rights-based community participation. There are several programs undertaken for health, education, economic empowerment etc., however, every program is 'rights-based'. Enabling women's self-reliance and bringing about active consciousness and participation in exercising human and constitutional rights is *MASUM*'s foundation.



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Its flagship counselling programme called *Samvaad*, conducted across villages in Purandar and Bhor talukas, offers female survivors of abuse and violence legal and emotional support with the help of experienced lawyers and social workers. *Samvaad* works closely with village panchayats, police personnel, public transport functionaries and other stakeholders where the goal is to make gender-based violence socially and politically unacceptable and be recognised as the violation of human rights.

One of the important tasks that is being carried out by *Samvaad* is continuous gender sensitisation of men and boys. For this purpose, there are residential workshops conducted in Purandar taluka of Pune, with 100-120 adolescents and youth participants in each batch.

"Challenging the patriarchy must start at an early age. If you are doing chores at home, you are not 'helping' anybody, you are just doing your bit of owning household responsibilities, just like women are!", Dr Gupte explains how gender roles and responsibilities are discussed in these workshops taking place in schools and colleges.

Consent is another important concept that is taught which starts by asking the participants in applying it to every day insignificant situations. *"By making our boys and men aware of this concept in their daily life, it becomes easier for them to apply it to complex and intimate situations like sexuality and relationships",* Dr Gupte says. The sessions also cover discussions around gender and sexual diversity.

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“We are not against men, we are against the system of patriarchy, where men are the prime owners of property, most of the decision-making process is controlled by men. So, it is our appeal to men to join us in fighting against the system of oppression and injustice so that every single person gets a fair chance at life. We are looking at annihilation of patriarchy and caste by involving people in the process of social change”, Dr Gupte expresses vociferously MASUM’s resolve to patiently work as change agent for an equal, democratic society with no violence, disparities or discrimination.

Be it cultural advocacy through literature or spousal counselling by HMF or gender sensitisation workshops in Pune, each of these interventions are conducting a rather arduous task of deconstructing the obstinate patriarchal ideas of what it means to be a ‘man’ while constructing alternatives that are more sustainable and are free from toxicity.

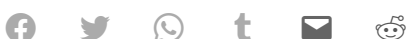
Epilogue

These facets of gender rights activism showcase different paths these passionate and dedicated individuals have taken towards an equal and just society. Be it cultural advocacy through literature or spousal counselling by HMF or gender sensitisation workshops in Pune, each of these interventions are conducting a rather arduous task of deconstructing the obstinate patriarchal ideas of what it means to be a ‘man’ while constructing alternatives that are more sustainable and are free from toxicity.

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