

Working with Paradoxes: A critical feminist engagement with men's rights groups

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15th August, 2015. It was a pleasant Saturday morning and the nation was probably reveling in the patriotism that 'days of national importance' tend to unleash upon us. Meanwhile, in a moderately-sized hall in a three-star hotel on the outskirts of Mumbai, a "counter-revolution" was brewing. This was a conference by, of, and for the 200 odd Men's Rights Activists (henceforth, MRAs) from various NGOs across the country, all of which are part of the umbrella group, 'Save Indian Family' (SIF). The occasion was the 7th National SIF Meet. The choice of date was not accidental – it symbolized the resolve of the MRAs to free themselves from the clutches of "autocratic feminist rule" which had rendered men "vulnerable and powerless" in the face of "feminist onslaught" particularly in the domain of legal activism.



As I made my way into the venue, it was difficult to not notice that all of them, without exception, were dressed in dull blue-coloured t-shirts with the 'Helpline for Men' number inscribed in black and bold on all of them. There were mostly men in the room with about 5-6 women. As I prepared myself for the six long hours of anti-feminist tirade that I had signed up for, I was also deeply thankful to some of my respondents who had invited me for what was meant to be an "internal" affair among and for MRAs.

The day proceeded with sessions and panel discussions on topics such as 'Counselling for Men: Need and Strategies', 'How to Engage with the Media', 'Fathers' Rights', 'Men's Health and Medical Care', 'The Great Issue of Men's Suicide', and so on. In the course of the day, I interacted with many MRAs and their families, some of whom were to become my principal respondents in almost a year-long study.

I reflect on this day here for it was one of my earliest and most significant points of contact with the men's rights 'movement'^[1] in the country. It was the day when I was to meet an MRA who would hand me over his visiting card with the most enviable kind of confidence as he would declare, "This has the link to my blog, and if you call yourself a feminist, I guarantee to convert you by the time you are done reading my 5th piece"; I was to meet a 53-year-old woman-member of a men's rights group who identified as a feminist and claimed that 'Indian feminists' had gotten it wrong all this while; I was to meet many "falsely accused", some very aggressive and some disturbingly depressed husbands who had lost their jobs and were in various stages of their court proceedings; I was to be in a room full of people who were genuinely convinced that they had all been wronged and their culprit was feminism. In short, this room was metonymic of my central challenge as a researcher – how does a feminist-identified woman researcher ethically access and seriously interpret a space such as this, a 'movement' such as the men's rights 'movement'?

We are at a political moment today that does not allow us the luxury of dismissing anything as 'fringe', especially something as potentially appealing as the men's rights 'movement', which is predicated on an idea of the articulation of 'reverse oppression' by the historically dominant as soon as the marginalized begin to assert themselves and secure some rights. My project here is to understand the difficult and uncomfortable questions that the MRAs' agenda poses to feminist theory and methodology. I am also interested in reflecting on the methodological issues that arise when researching a space like this and these are precisely what I have tried to gesture towards in my

recounting of the 7th National SIF Meet.

Stories of a Story: Tracing the Origins

Let me first briefly sketch the story/ies of the story of emergence of men's rights groups in India. It is a mildly difficult task to unearth a coherent, uniform documentation of the same as different MRAs recount and retell the story of men's rights activism differently. These are therefore stories of a story. For my account here, I have relied on interviews with about 10 MRAs.

One section of MRAs attributes the beginnings of men's rights groups in India to a Delhi-based advocate, Ram Prakash Chugh, fondly referred to as Comrade Chugh by many. One of the activists remarked, "Mr.Chugh is to the husband community of India what Karl Marx was to the working class." A self-identified 'victim' of an unhappy marriage, Chugh launched the Akhil Bhartiya Patni Atyachar Virodhi Morcha in the 80s and formed an organization called Men Cell, also known as Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Husbands. Today, the organization has a sister group called Mahila Raksha Samiti, formed by the female kin of the "falsely accused husbands". Credited by some as being the 'father of the men's rights movement in India', Chugh played a significant role in producing the category of the 'harassed' or 'battered husband', who had to bear the brunt of "pro-women laws" in the terrain of marriage and family.

There are also some who argue that it all began with organizations such as the Pirito Purush (The Harassed Man) founded in Kolkata in 1992 and the Purush Hak Sanrakshan Samiti founded in 1996 in Mumbai. Very few MRAs reported that Purush Suraksha in Nashik is the oldest men's rights organization. Regardless of the variations in articulations around the origins, all of them maintained that the groups were formed to fight the alleged misuse of Section 498A of the IPC^[2] and have over the years campaigned against a series of laws meant to safeguard and protect the interests of women (which have come about after years of feminist legal activism).

In 2005 'Save Indian Family' was born from a humble Yahoo group, 'Misuse of the Dowry Act', started by a handful of "aggrieved husbands" from Bangalore, Kolkata, Chennai, Delhi, and Hyderabad. One of the founders of the Yahoo group, Swaroop Sarkar from Kolkata reminisced, "Despite being a good husband, I was falsely accused of taking dowry by my wife and her family. I was in a state of trauma and had decided to commit suicide. But an internet search led me to baffling statistics – the number of men committing suicide is twice that of women. The figures were an eye-opener! They completely changed my idea of women as victims which I had been taught to believe since I was a child."

2005 was a defining point in the story of men's rights activism when it began to acquire a more organized form. It is for this reason that SIF is believed to be the "real" starting point of the 'movement'. Ruminating on the course of the 'movement', Sarkar commented, "Our biggest problem initially was that we were not organized. So with the founding of SIF, it was decided that anyone who joined SIF would have to go back and start a group in their own state of residence which would by default become a part of the larger SIF umbrella." Even though men's rights organisations are united in their disdain for "pro women laws", the degree and nature of their opposition to feminism varies, as does their approach and strategy. Indu Subhash from the Samaj Kalyan Santha, Lucknow, for example, refuses to call this the 'men's rights movement'. For her, this is a movement "to protect and preserve the traditional Indian family" and works as much for women as it does for men. She told me with the most definitive sense, "I regard myself as working for women's empowerment. Firstly, in my service to this movement, I help the mothers and sisters of those men who have been at the receiving end of unfair laws. It is the mothers and sisters who suffer the most, more than the accused men perhaps. Secondly, my organization trains adolescent girls and prospective wives to build a happy family, which will bring joy to them, their husbands as well as their in-laws. I have an entire module on 'Living harmoniously with the Husband'. Is this not work for women?" Subhash spoke to me at length about her fascinating 'family modules' which train the newly-wed wife on how to cook her first meal in the marital home within 20 minutes and the ageing wife, the "tricks" to keep her husband happy and "still in love". Further, Subhash believes that patience, docility, and subservience are "truly feminist values" and contemporary "Indian feminism" has been

hijacked by “western ideas of too much independence that lead to the breakdown of the family.” Many groups are more invested in issues of legislative lobbying and political representation. Most groups have a team dedicated to offering counseling services, which is deemed to be extremely significant to the MRA agenda of “converting every victim to an activist”. [3]

Questions for a Feminist

As a feminist who views oppression as being historically constituted through the interlocking systems of gender, caste, class, sexuality, and ability and rejects ‘women’ as an undifferentiated category, it becomes important to examine the questions that MRAs’ articulations raise for feminist theory and methodology. Some initial challenges for me were – How does a woman, feminist researcher access a largely masculine and anti-feminist world? Further, how and how much of one’s own political affiliations are to be revealed and what is the delicate balance of disclosure and concealment in a project like this? How does one work out the ethics of this? If the aim is to be a “good researcher” and understand how the anti-feminism of men’s rights groups is constructed, how does one balance the insertion of their own self which is likely to sometimes get viscerally affected by the articulation of their respondents? Most significantly, and linked with all of the issues raised above is the question of feminist methodology.

The tyranny of objectivity and the notion of the researcher as the “dispassionate observer” of their own research have been questioned by feminists time and again. Feminist methodology continues to remind us that the researcher is implicated within the larger relations of power they study and that the relationship between the researcher and their subjects is inscribed within these very networks of power. One of the most significant feminist contributions has been to emphasize the principles of empathy and mutuality[4] in this researcher-researched relationship. What then, in the context of a project on the purportedly anti-feminist MRAs, are the feminist modes of engagement? An attempt to work with some of these questions needs to be preceded by a brief detour which helps us situate MRAs. The 10 MRAs who I met were all Hindu, upper caste, middle class and regionally and linguistically diverse, with their NGOs located in urban parts of the country. They were mostly engineers, worked in IT and marketing companies and ran small to medium-scale businesses. Many had lost their jobs on account of the cases against them. Regardless of the differences in background, their camaraderie was striking, based upon their “empirical experience” – filing of “false cases” against them by their wives following which some of them claimed to have attempted suicide. The assumption is that it is an experience as disturbing and humiliating as this which “converts” a mere victim (or kin of victim, who is also a victim) into an activist. And yet, despite the ‘conversion’, victimhood is central to the MRA narrative. It needs to be reinforced time and again through a repetition of (methodologically questionable) statistics of suicide rate among men, the “tyranny” of “pro-women laws” and often, shifts in material realities such as the loss of a job, loss of respect in the neighbourhood, etc. The construction of this victimhood is therefore central to both their identity as ‘activists’ as well as their relationship with one another. If the ‘battered husband’ is the victim, the perpetrator is not just the wife and/or her family but also what many MRAs refer to as ‘feminist terrorism’ which would supposedly ensure a bias in the favour of women both in the court of law as well as the society.

In my engagement with MRAs, I had made my position fairly clear from an early stage. One of the opening questions that I was greeted with, when I spoke over the phone with one of them was, “Are you one of those feminist types?” My answer was a firm yes. I also added that I wanted to listen to them and understand the world of men’s rights activism with as much intellectual honesty as I can. The reactions and the interactions that played out in the course of the research were varied – some were extremely suspicious and blocked me out, some evoked threat and had to be blocked, some took my feminist position as a challenge and were insistent on “converting” me (much of their confidence stemming from the fact that a popular contemporary female face of the men’s rights ‘movement’ was “once a feminist” till she “learnt better”), many were keen on talking to me and making available their material – I was allowed to attend some meetings and denied access to some others. Their disclosure and concealment, I realised, was as strategic (if not more) than mine. In general, there was willingness to speak and listen on both their part and mine, just as there also was mutual performative play, but it would be false to say that distance and suspicion were ever suspended. Thus, my reading of the MRAs is less about ‘actual facticity’ but more

about the way they posited themselves to and around me.

The experience was far from smooth – not just in terms of posing pragmatic constraints but also difficulty in walking the tight rope between one’s politics and potential moments of identification. There was, for example, an instance when the mother of one of the “falsely accused husbands” broke down while having snacks with and talking to me at the end of a day- long seminar. “I have no idea what went down between the two of them – my son and daughter-in-law. All I know is that the police was at our doorstep to arrest us all because she claims that we beat her! I cannot even raise my hand to kill a mosquito. How could I have beaten her!” she said while crying uncontrollably. The point was not whether she was speaking the truth or lying. The point also was not whether her son was indeed falsely accused. What seemed significant (and even instinctive) at that point was to empathize. And this was one of the many instances where I (re)learnt that empathetic listening and criticality do not always have to be mutually exclusive; my interpretive task of exploring the constructedness of her experience does not necessarily have to be at odds with my willingness to recognize the legitimacy of her experience. Feminist methods have always made way for radical possibilities by pushing for a language of working with contradictions and fraught realities, of moving beyond the convenient and simplistic binaries of ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’; it is more productive to view men’s rights activism within this critical feminist framework rather than dismissing it or thinking of it as irrelevant.

Another issue at stake for feminists, with regard to MRAs, is the appropriation of language and ‘experience’ – as an affective and political category. The rhetoric of ‘reverse oppression’ employed by men’s rights groups is a demonstration of the manner in which claims of marginalization, the need for equality and safe spaces and a politics of inclusion can be co-opted by men’s rights groups. It was profoundly amusing but also thought-provoking to hear one of the men’s rights activists say, “We strive for equality between men and women and try to be as inclusive as possible in our approach.” On being asked to explain further, he remarked, “I mean that equality is important for all kinds of men – we want to reach out to men from all kinds of social groups and mobilize them.” It would be useful for our feminisms to be aware of the manner in which what we think of as ‘feminist vocabulary’ is being appropriated for anti- feminist ends and what intellectual and political implications that has for the project of feminist theorizing and activism.

The critical charge of feminist modes of working comes from their ability to explore contrarian ideas and relationships, to reject polarities and dwell on the ‘in-betweens’, to lend its frameworks and categories to messy terrains. This is precisely what makes it useful for feminist categories of analysis to engage with oppositional spaces and movements, including and especially the anti- feminist ones – a task we cannot afford to not attend to in the contemporary political moment.

Photo-credit: [Here](#)

[1] I use the term ‘movement’ throughout in quotation marks to suggest an uncertainty on whether they can be termed a ‘movement’ in terms of their scale at the contemporary moment.

[2] Section 498 A of the IPC makes harassment of women in the marital home a non- bailable, non- compoundable, cognizable offence and empowers the police to make immediate arrests.

[3] As mentioned by a participant at one of the sessions at the 7th SIF National Meet.

[4] Stacey (1988)

References

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