THE WIRE

Uncovering the Domestic Lives of Public Men in Post-Colonial India

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Historian Gyanendra Pandey's 'Men at Home' interrogates a masculinity so inherent in our society that it is usually commonplace.

A detail from the photograph of a wedding photo taken outside a police officer's family home in northern India, December 1935, which is featured on the cover of the book 'Men at Home'.

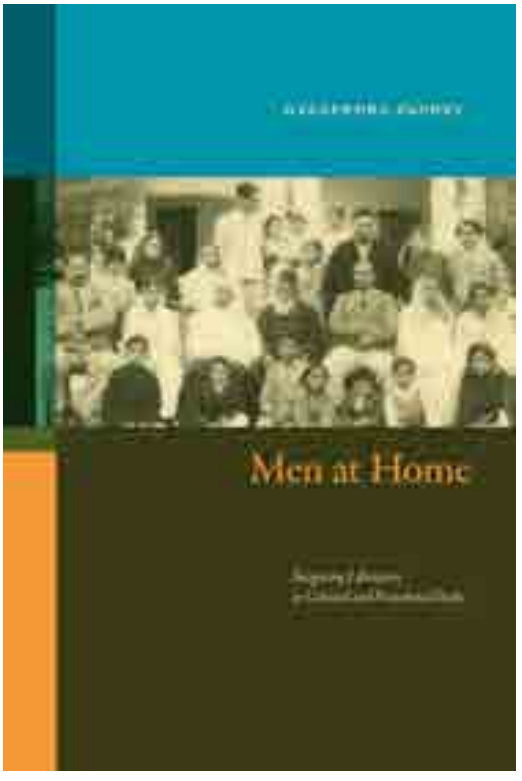
> *"In much of the modern world, both nation and woman have been imaged as mother – the first calling for sacrifice, the other sacrificing."*
>
> — Gyanendra Pandey, *Men at Home*

Over time, women have written and spoken in countless ways about the unspoken labour of being primary homemakers in a married life – the drudgery of housewifery, the scale of sacrifice, the psychological toll and more. We have also read about the many ways in which disempowered Indian women have rebelled, refused and sought to regain control in their lives. What has been written about far less is how *men* – even ones who've perhaps done great things for society and the country – are *at home*. That is, until now.

Historian Gyanendra Pandey's latest book, *Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (published by Orient Blackswan), delves into the everyday lives of modern Indian families through some gripping archival material – autobiographies, memoirs, fiction and ethnographies – the behaviours of a few renowned men, their wives, and a few women activists, in an attempt to uncover a masculinity so inherent in our society that it is usually commonplace.

What Pandey describes as “an essay on men’s existence in the South Asian domestic world”, the book moves between a quasi-academic tone and moments of stark self-castigation and rumination on the moral failures of his own kind.

It is divided into three sections – ‘Legacies’, ‘Practices’ and ‘History in a Visceral Register’. Pandey selects his characters across class, caste, gender and backgrounds. For instance, Rahul Sankrityayan and Harivansh Rai Bachchan, who are discussed at length in the book, belong to the ‘upper’ castes, whereas B.R. Ambedkar, Jagjivan Ram and Narendra Jadhav are from the ‘lower’ castes.



Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India, Gyanendra Pandey, Orient Blackswan, 2025.

He also gives an insight into upper-caste Muslims through Pakistani actress Khurshid Mirza, a male intellectual, Akhtar Hussain Raipuri, and his wife Hameeda Raipuri. It is that Raipuris’ wedding photograph that is seen on the cover of the book.

Unlike his previous works, which go into greater detail about caste, communalism, nationalism and other issues, in *Men at Home,* Pandey rehearses these subjects with an overlying critique of how men treat household duties versus how women are “forced” into it – he calls this “micro-histories”, as opposed to the more common “state histories”. Pandey approaches the issue like an insider, without the condescension that sometimes seeps into men writing with a feminist lens.

He compels the reader to reconsider their views of these men from upper-, middle- and lower-classes: how much they were all alike despite the “variations in their personalities, inclinations, careers, and indeed, social and cultural backgrounds”. It is fascinating to read about how, in all their pursuits of critical works and their public service, they easily dissociated from their domestic duties, abandoned the home, while still being dependent on their homemakers – their wives, family, domestic workers and other subordinates.

This is how Pandey describes it in the book:

“For many leading male thinkers and activists, the domestic space became a space and time to rest and recuperate from illness, exhaustion, disappointment, or defeat, as well as to procreate, entertain and establish and maintain a status.”

Although it is an assessment of history, the book speaks just as smoothly to contemporary debates on masculinity and domestic labour in India.

Of course, there can never be enough discussion to undo the colossal politics of unpaid labour of women at home through the centuries – not just of South Asian women, but around the world too. As per the International Labour Organisation, globally, around 708 million women are outside the labour force due to unpaid care responsibilities (2024), and in India, this estimation is far greater.

Power plays out in a very understated and peculiar way in a domestic space – what Pandey describes as “*ghar-sansar*” – a terrain inhabited by women far more than men, as mothers and homemakers. Celebrated authors like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy and others have long foregrounded a female gaze on this inequality and the emotional realities around it.

Throughout history, men in Indian households have, more often than not, remained passive, entitled and arrogant. As Pandey writes:

“Men touched food – to eat, though not to cook or prepare it. They touched beds, or sheets or makeshift mattresses on the floor – to sleep, but not to tidy or clean them. They touched women – but women as bodies more than as thinking, emotional beings.”

Pandey also records the occasional exceptions when men did some household work. For instance M.K. Gandhi, he notes, “cleaned his own toilet and forced his wife Kasturba to do the same, despite her considerable discomfort”; Premchand “lent a hand in cutting vegetables, feeding and dressing the children, and caring for the sick, when need arose”.

About Ambedkar, the ‘Father of the Indian Constitution’, Pandey records how he “occasionally, on a holiday,…cooked for himself”, and that whenever he did so, “he invited others to share the meal“. In Ambedkar‘s first and second marriages, Pandey notes how “he prepared seven dishes which took him three hours as a regular routine”.

However, this was the exception. On the daily, women and domestic workers did the cooking, while the “dirtier work” was usually done by staff considered ‘untouchables’.

As a leading author of the subaltern studies school, the visible care he put in researching for the book and the enthralling nuances is not a surprise coming from Pandey. However, for a man to have written about the lives of other men so intuitively is what is likely to grip readers.

The author admits this as a history “dangerously close to the bones” as it is “liable to lacerate the flesh, the self and self-image, in unexpected ways”.

Apart from the men, who are the primary subjects of the book, the author also brings into picture the lives of some notable women – the likes of Baby Kamble and Kausalya Baisantri, who are discussed in some length; the wives, some of whom activists and public figures themselves; and a few other notable mentions, like Ismat Chugtai.

The book carefully addresses patriarchy and how these women were compelled into marriage and domesticity, with many ominously referring to themselves as the exalted housekeeper. However, the book lacks the finer details on the complexities of their lives – how they resisted, negotiated, rebelled or endured quietly.

This imbalance raises a question on whether the thinness of women's presence reflects the limits of the archive, or the constraints of the methodology shaped, inevitably, by a male author, even as he seeks to interrogate it.

The book also engages sparingly with secondary literature, much of which is confined to the index pages. Additionally, the opening chapters demand patience from the reader before the argument gains momentum.

Speaking at the launch of the book in Delhi, Pandey described the third section of the book (History in a Visceral Register) as the most important one because there has been "no archive for what men do: their values, their sense of entitlement, their gestures".

The launch of the 'Men at Home' book in New Delhi. Photo: The Wire.

He underscores, "Stateist histories are what we have been stuck with forever, but micro-histories are important too. Only through this will the everyday practices [of men and women] appear."

Pandey ends the book with difficult anecdotes from his own life, his family and his shortcomings as a husband – a short but important reflection that somewhat ties the loose ends of the book together.

Men at Home is an important inclusion in Indian feminist literature and the study of subcontinental masculinity – of "*navarapan*" (husbandliness), to borrow Baby Kamble's term that Pandey opens the book with.

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