

# Book Review

Men and Masculinities

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Prem Chowdhry, *Gender, Power and Identity: Essays on Masculinities in Rural North India*. Orient BlackSwan: New Delhi, 2019. 296 pp. ₹795 (hardcover). ISBN: 9789352876570

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In *Gender, Power and Identity*, Prem Chowdhry offers a nuanced analysis of fluid contestations of masculinities occurring in contemporary India, and its linkage to increased gender-based and caste violence. Consisting of two new and four previously published essays on rural North Indian masculinities, Chowdhry explores the articulation, contestations, and (re)shaping of diverse masculinities within caste hierarchy and differing access to resources and power. Chowdhry draws on her three-decade long fieldwork in rural North India, and the province of Haryana—a region to which she belongs—to provide a critical and comprehensive analysis of a conjoined centrality of caste and class relations, patriarchal ideology, British colonialism, and globalization in shaping identities and practices of rural masculinities and gender relations in India.

Employing a postcolonial feminist and a political economy perspective, Chowdhry situates her analysis in the material reality of the region by using three crucial historical phases: colonialism, the Green Revolution, and neoliberal globalization. The book proceeds chronologically with the first chapter, “Militarized Masculinities,” tracing the role of British colonialists in framing men from certain agriculturalist caste groups as muscular and martial in sharp contrast to dominant portrayals of Indian men as effete and emasculated. The consequent recruitment of such men in the British army, Chowdhry argues, was a political project to buy “masculinized loyalty” (p.14) of agriculturalist castes.

Subsequent chapters detail the “masculine” reverberations of this calculated strategy within the agrarian society, including practices through which hegemonic caste-linked masculinities are affirmed in rural society. A focus on masculinization of rural spaces, both private and public, and exclusively male leisure activities provides fascinating insights into how the socialization of masculine ideals and the normalizing of patriarchal dominance over women is ideologically constructed and disseminated. Their restrictive use and access also legitimize caste hierarchies

between upper and low-caste men. Chowdhry also flags challenges posed by women to all-male, non-democratic caste-councils or *Khap Panchayats*.

With successful manhood defined by a job, social status, marriage, and parenthood, the chapter “Crisis of Masculinity in Haryana” outlines the role of agrarian crises, rising unemployment and unfulfilled aspirations among rural educated youth, and widespread sex-selective abortion of female fetuses in creating anxiety among rural dominant-caste men. It details how they veer to becoming foot soldiers for regressive, unconstitutional, all-male caste councils and for committing violence against challengers to ideologies of caste and patriarchy. Similarly, “Understanding a Male Concept: Honour in Honour Killings” traces the legitimization of honor killings in rural North India to the region’s material reality and caste structure. It deftly argues that women obtaining constitutional equal inheritance rights to land and resources, and asserting control over their sexuality and choice of marriage partners has posed a serious threat to upper-caste masculine dominance over resources, maintained through the strict enforcement of caste endogamous marriages. Through case studies, Chowdhry illustrates how honor killings of inter-caste lovers operate as “lessons” to deter future challengers to entrenched masculine privilege, and how such killings are approved by local communities and caste councils as the “manly” thing to do (p.197).

Extensive use of local idioms, ballads, proverbs, and folk songs, while adding to the richness of the text, also reveal the informal modes through which ideals and practices of masculinity and masculine behavior are culturally entrenched and reinforced. To illustrate, a popular local saying, *Zamin joi zor ki, zor ghati hor ki* (land and wife can only be held with force, when force fails they pass into other hands; p. 40) underlines the association between control of women’s sexuality and land with rural masculinity. Here, “Popular Perceptions of Masculinity,” offers a corrective to imaginings of rural Indian women as passive victims of men’s violence by foregrounding strategies of “celebratory sexuality” (p. 115). Women’s songs, sung on festive occasions, with themes of caste-transgressive lust and desire for low caste men, showcase a delightfully playful yet deeply subversive gendered resistance against the virility and masculine prowess of dominant caste men.

The only drawback is the book’s lack of engagement with non-conforming and gay masculinities in rural India. The statement that homosexuality is “not considered ‘odd’ or ‘unnatural’ . . . as it is considered an intrinsic part of the natural progression of a boy in his life” (p. 137) sorely sticks out as it assumes homosexuality as a “passing” phase. Given Chowdhry’s long-term engagement with rural Haryana, devoting a chapter to marginalized gay and trans men’s identities could have provided rare insights about the lived reality of such men in rural spaces. Notwithstanding, the book is a timely addition to a small but growing collection of scholarly works on Indian masculinity and is a compelling text for anyone interested in India, gender, masculinity, caste, and its popular culture.