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Growing up Male

One way for men to relate to the condition of women and their problems is by considering how boys are brought up. Their socialisation as male children is concerned with women, not just in the sense that it involves women as mothers, sisters, and so on, but also in the more crucial sense that in order to become men they have to accept and behave according to a certain predetermined image of women.

The data I discuss below are highly local and limited, but they do offer a somewhat unconventional point of entry into the symbolic universe that shapes the male personality in our country. My data are from a small town, an ex-princely state in Madhya Pradesh. Hundreds of such descriptions would have to be acquired in order to place male socialisation in some kind of a broader perspective.

In my boyhood, the most significant event that shaped my map of the place of men and women in the world was my entry into a state-run, all-boys secondary school, after finishing the primary grades. Even at the primary school stage, co-education was extremely rare those days. The fact that my primary school allowed boys to sit with girls had something to do with the ethos of basic education.¹ Boys and girls not only sat together, they shared all craft-based activities that the school offered—

book-binding, paper designing, weaving, embroidery, cooking, and gardening.

One got so used to being with girls and to seeing them as ordinary children that it proved almost traumatic to move up to a secondary school where all children were boys and even the teachers were all men.² This sudden separation from girls made no sense at first; a little later it led us to see girls as an enigma; and finally, we accepted it as a protection that society offered us against the danger of coming in contact with a female human before we were ready for such contact. This rationalising took years; it was a tedious process, demanding tremendous amounts of psychic energy; and, of course, we never had access to an adult to ask any questions about the great mystery of girls and their separation from us.

Girls went to a school that was designed conspicuously differently from the boys' school. In the centre of the girls' school was a courtyard where they played in total seclusion and safety from the outside world. Despite all these years since my childhood, I can still hear the shouts of girls playing games in that courtyard—shouts that we heard from our side of a broken wall, which we often toyed with the idea of climbing over. Enclosed by a ring of classrooms, Ashok trees, and the wall, the girls' school was legally accessible through a twenty-foot high iron gate that was opened only twice a day—to let the girls in and to let them out. The boys' school had no such courtyard or major entrance. Our playground was an annexe, just a big space attached to the school, devoid of any symbolism of confinement. This architectural difference between boys' and girls' schools is an important aspect of our school culture and it has persisted to this day.

Every evening we watched those hundreds of school girls in their blue skirts walking home in silent clusters of six or seven, crowding the narrow streets of the small town in a compact, neat

style. As they walked they looked impossibly purposeful. We boys used the street for so many different things—as a place to stand about watching, to run round and play, to try out the manoeuvrability of our bikes. Not so for girls. As we noticed all the time, for girls the street was simply a means to get straight home from school. And even for this limited use of the street they always went in clusters, perhaps because behind their purposeful demeanour they carried the worst fears of being assaulted. Watching those silent clusters for years eroded my basic sense of endowing individuality to every human being. I got used to believing that girls were not individuals.

‘By separating the sexes unnaturally for almost ten years after puberty we have invented a social system which defies all physiological, psychological, and cultural logic. It is perhaps one of the major aberrations in the history of mankind.’ When Dinesh Mohan wrote this in an article on university education, it was seen as a little joke.³ I have never come across any other reference to the separation of boys from girls as a factor which influences the culture and achievement of education in our country. To my mind it is a weightier factor than campus politics and the erosion of university autonomy combined.

The government has no specific policy guidelines on the question of co-education. Both at the secondary school and the college stage, separate institutions for girls continue to be started in the name of promoting female education. Apart from legitimising the ‘purdah’ system, such institutions perpetuate the tragic pattern of socialisation, of which I have offered a glimpse. I call this pattern tragic because it dehumanises. The boy who learns to perceive girls as objects annihilates his chances of relating to a woman as a friend and of enriching his life with such a relationship. He becomes a victim of his own attitudes. He begins to lead a life in which the desire for sex is transformed

into the need to oppress, a point I will discuss below. Our university campuses and colleges are full of such boys.

This discussion may suggest that co-education is the answer to the problem. It may be an answer but it is by no means easy or straightforward. By merely putting boys and girls together we cannot solve the problem of stereotyping of girls by boys and by male teachers. A student of mine, Bharati Roychoudhury, studied the behaviour of male teachers in mixed classrooms in Delhi schools and concluded that girls were given far less attention, encouragement, and opportunities for responsible action than boys. In England, several educators have expressed the view that co-educational schools offer fewer opportunities to girls than all-girls schools do.⁴

Such a view does not surprise me and I find it extremely important to keep it in mind when we urge the government to move towards co-education in all schools. Unless such a move is accompanied by significant changes in teacher training, the move may end up being counter-productive to girls. I believe that stereotyping of personality on the basis of sex is just as rampantly common among school teachers as it is among other members of society. Teachers will have to be trained to deal with boys and girls in an undiscriminating way if we want to humanise the culture of our schools by making them co-educational.

Aggressiveness and the desire to appear tough, combined with and arising from a deep fear of women, were common among us by the time we came to the final years of the secondary school. Some of the boys who were older talked about marriage as an event that involved tremendous risk and adventure. We had learnt from textbooks, songs, dramas, and lectures about the great celibate saints and poets of the Bhakti period. In the lives and personal development of some of them, we thought freedom from women had played an important role. We had also read

some verses written during the Riti period, and some of these, especially the ones we were supposed to read for the undergraduate course in Hindi literature, gave such precise descriptions of the female body that even our teachers felt too embarrassed to read them aloud.

To us it appeared that marriage was the only sure means to get close to a woman, and we found it very ironical and cruel that this one means was fraught with an impossible challenge and personal risk. No one seemed to know precisely what the challenge or risk was, but it was unquestioned tacit knowledge that if you did not want to be defeated by a girl you must dominate her. Boasting about one's strength was extremely common. Some of the older boys were devout worshippers of Hanuman and Shiva—in that order—and they firmly believed that these gods were especially meant for men.

In the first part of his autobiography *Kya bhooloon kya yaad karoon*, the Hindi poet Harivanshrai Bachchan describes in great detail the tremendous anxiety he went through in the months preceding his marriage. It would be wrong to dismiss the anxiety and the behaviour linked with it as a universal phenomenon or to hide them under that amorphous, handy label called 'human nature'. I think the desire to achieve 'success' in one's sexual life after marriage is a cultural configuration, and at least one of its many roots can be found in the culture of our schools and colleges.

Apart from separation of the sexes, this culture is characterised by total silence on sexual behaviour and by subtle promotion of the ideal of celibacy as a qualification of sainthood. The stereotyping of female—as well as male—characters in textbooks is just one segment of the school culture. Now when stereotyping has come under attack from everyone concerned, it has been happily replaced by cardboard characters that NCERT's writers are eminently capable of constructing and which seem to satisfy the critics. The agenda of dehumanisation of girls, and, of

course, boys too (although it takes place at a different level), has entered a new phase.

The crucial part of growing up male was to learn to see girls as objects. I say 'learn' because I still remember my perception of girls before I had begun to see them as objects and that my perception then was very different from what it became later. The sources of learning were many, the most important among them being other boys. Our contact with girls was minimal, in the sense that we hardly ever talked to any girl who was not a relative. And, of course, a sister did not count as a girl. On the other hand, we saw hundreds of girls each day of our lives—girls we could never hope to talk to. We saw cinema posters and sometimes films which mostly veered around cardboard female characters. Some of us read books that verged on pornography, where the treatment of the female was like that of a lifeless object that has no capacity to either suffer or enjoy. The conversations we overheard often consisted of references to women as a problem, and some of these conversations were among women themselves. I can recall several conversations among old women referring to girls as temporary property.

Equally profound was the influence of abusive terms that many boys used all the time and even in the presence of adults, including teachers. These terms were metaphors of sexual intercourse, and the terms mostly referred to different categories of men; so, one learnt to see men as belonging to different types and levels of mettle or perdition, depending on who they had subjected to intercourse. In brief, as a boy I was surrounded by a powerful discourse that delineated girls and women as sex objects, with little or nothing of their own in life in terms of sensation or demand.

This kind of discussion leads one to wonder whether socialisation is a closed process. Such a thought is endorsed in the view that the school and community should be complementary to

each other in socialising the young. If one accepts this principle of complementariness, then there is no hope of changing the prevailing code of sex-typing through education, which means that there is no hope that education can intervene in the cultural reproduction of entrenched sex roles. Yet, educationists never tire of telling the world that education is an agency of change. How does one get out of this contradiction? I think the way out is to propose counter-socialisation as the school's domain. That is, we need not see the school as an institution working in harmony with the community or the larger society in the matter of sex-role socialisation. On the contrary, we need to perceive the school in conflict with the community's code of socialisation.

This line of thought would lead us to reflect on the ways and means by which the school can act as a counter-socialiser in sex-role learning. If the community believes in segregating the sexes during adolescence, the school must set an alternative example by mixing the sexes. Similarly, while the larger social ethos offers stereotyped models of the roles of men and women, the school must insist that the adults working in it will not act in stereotyped and stereotyping ways. In the world outside the school, knowledge about sex is taboo; in the school such knowledge must be accessible.

Cinema and television cash in on conservative images of women and men; the school's media—that is, textbooks and other materials—should offer images and symbols that motivate the reader to look at human beings in terms of their own struggle for an identity, rather than as reciting prefabricated conversations. And finally, if acceptance of the prevailing order and its norms is what society demands, then the school should demand the spirit of inquiry and offer opportunities to practise it. If all this sounds an idealistic, tall order, then one must remember that the agenda of changing women's place and role in society is no different.

What is Worth Teaching?

Notes

1. I am saying 'ethos' and not the policy of basic education. Gandhi did not believe in co-education, nor did other famous basic educators. But, the plan of basic education created an ethos in which all kinds of innovations could take place.
2. The primary school described here admitted boys till the early sixties after which it shed its 'basic' character as well as its co-educational policy. It was a government school, and in changing its policy it must have followed the directive of a local officer. The government does not have any clear-cut policy on co-education.
3. 'Virus on the campus' in *Seminar* (293, January 1984).
4. For one such discussion see *Co-education Reconsidered*, edited by Rosemary Deem (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1984).