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BOOK REVIEW

‘Men at Home’: Gyanendra Pandey’s book on South Asian masculinity leaves much to be desired

The parade of men behaving badly with little to redeem them begins to feel like ritual self-flagellation.

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Historian Gyanendra Pandey. | South Asia Institute at Columbia University on YouTube

Bashir Badr once wrote: *Be-vaqt agar jaoonga sab chaunk padenge / ik umr hui din mein kabhi ghar nahin dekha* (It will startle them all, if I go at the wrong time / it’s been an age since I saw my own home in the daytime). Perhaps in the aftermath of pandemic lockdowns and the growth of work from home culture, the picture has become complicated, but Bashir Badr’s she’er captures what used to be a commonplace domestic phenomenon: the temporal shift between the ease of the day time on a weekday when the salaried breadwinner, typically a man, is away and the frantic nature of other times when his presence becomes a vortex around which the house must turn: is his breakfast ready, has the towel been laid out for his bath, and so forth.

I recall that when I first read those two lines, I felt a strong urge to hear more about the life of the man in his home, but Badr himself moved on to other things in that ghazal and in his oeuvre. So I was happy to learn that an eminent historian such as Gyanendra Pandey had decided to seek out the Indian man in his home in his new book *Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. And as I read through the book I found some wonderful nuggets from the trove of archival material that Pandey has marshalled – for example, Ambedkar once cooked seven dishes over a period of three hours and shared them with his visitors – but I did not find the satisfying clarity that Badr's two lines bring to the subject.

The male South Asian mind

Although the book is structured in three sections with resonant titles – "Legacies", "Practices" and "History in a Visceral Register" – it strikes the reader not so much as a connected flowing work but more as a collection of memoirs and writings that Pandey has decided to work with, that provide him pathways into the male South Asian mind in the middle of the 20th century. Various binaries find both their sides represented. There are both upper caste and Dalit Hindu men here: Rahul Sankrityayan and Harivansh Rai Bachchan are the two most closely discussed of the former group; BR Ambedkar, Jagjivan Ram and the economist Narendra Jadhav are read for important insights on the latter group. Then there are some upper caste Muslims as foils to the upper caste Hindus: prominent Pakistani actress Khurshid Mirza, a male intellectual Akhtar Hussain Raipuri and his wife Hameeda Raipuri.

The other divide is between the politically prominent versus the not-so-prominent, Ambedkar versus the editor of his writings, Vasant Moon, for example. This cleavage in particular causes puzzlement because it leads to the question of the role of public life and public prominence in the way the protagonists present themselves, a question that is not answered satisfactorily in the book.

And then there are the women: Premchand's second wife Shivrani Devi, Ambedkar's second wife Sharda Devi, Bacchan's second wife Teji, Jagjivan Ram's second wife Indrani, and Sankrityayan's third wife Kamala. (Anyone detecting a pattern here?) Listmaking is an activity that always draws complaints. (What about the Pasmanda Muslim? Why no Gandhi, mentioned but barely analysed? Why no politically prominent married woman like, say, Sarojini Naidu? Why no influential unmarried women like, for example, Mahadevi Varma or Rajkumari Amrit Kaur?) Having said that, the collection of sources that are included is the book's great strength, because it brings together a range of voices from the 20th century, and it brings out the human and everyday aspects of the personalities of the protagonists, at least a few of whom have now ascended into the cloudy skies of mythical status.

There are several superficial elements – cover design, fonts, the two maps of the subcontinent before and after Partition – that signal this to be an academic work, but *Men at Home* confounds the expectations raised by an academic work, and especially one written by an eminent historian, specifically the expectation that its themes would develop into a coherent analytical framework that sheds some new light on a substantially important matter. The top-level theme is clear: Indian men, however you subdivide that category, no matter how progressive they were or weren't, didn't like to do housework and lorded it over their wives.

This is not exactly news, although it is definitely a message that could bear repetition and one could argue that by anchoring it into the history of the 20th century, Pandey does a service to the

current day when notions that were considered well established by feminist scholarship are being subjected to gaslighting from multiple quarters. But apart from the depressing message of "the more things change, the more they stay the same", little else emerges and after a while, the parade of men behaving badly with little to redeem them begins to feel like ritual self-flagellation. Some of the side alleys lead to interesting places.

For example, there is an early chapter that focuses on the architecture of homes built between the late-19th and mid-20th centuries, demonstrating how the spatial configuration reinforced gender-differentiated notions of freedom and space. Another wonderful excursion is entitled "Things men touched", the chapter heading itself opening out a new way of looking at the home and the world.

"Let me begin with the commonplace, a few generalizations that for a time applied over much of the world. Men touch 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."

But the excitement that this novel viewpoint generates is quickly stifled by the admitted reliance on generalisations. And this reliance is seen not just in this chapter but in several others, often to the extent that Pandey appears to talk over the source and make imputations the text itself doesn't support. One example of this tendency comes in the context of Harivansh Rai Bacchan who, we are told, soon after marrying Teji with whom he is very happy and has a prototypical two-child family, decides to first spend his summers training as part of his university's Officer Training Corps and then leaves for England for two years to do his PhD, leaving his new wife alone to raise the children while fending off "admirers." Bacchan, in his autobiography, speculates on the reasons for his behaviour thus: "From a psychological point of view it would be only natural for me, faced by the 'inner man' in Teji, to become more conscious of the 'inner woman' in myself and seek to negate it."

A sympathetic reader might consider these claims a complication of gender binaries, an unsympathetic reader might critique it as a simplistic and now-discredited idea that was fashionable at the time, but Pandey attacks it by ignoring it and glossing this quote by returning to his own pet themes: "The memoirist does not mention the idea of the runaway father, or the resistance to being tied down by the daily round of domestic work." This may be a perfectly reasonable thing to say in an informal conversation between friends but probably should not appear in an academic work without textual evidence to support such claims.

On Akhtar Hussain Raipuri, Pandey says, "We have little information on what domestic work or physical care of the children Akhtar took on. It is unlikely to have been substantial, if we go by the evidence of other South Asian middle-class men." Raipuri is indicted for being part of a particular class of people with the prosecutor admitting right in the beginning that there is no direct evidence of the crime. Isn't this a complete reversal of how history based on empirical evidence is supposed to be written?

The absence of secondary literature

The other reason why *Men at Home* doesn't feel like an academic book is the absence of engagement with the secondary literature. Given a project of this nature which is located at the

intersection of more than one discipline, it could be argued that there are too many strands of thought that intersect in a study of this kind. Nonetheless, the omissions cause puzzlement, especially since some of the evidence presented in this book could strongly support the theories of earlier thinkers.

For example, Nancy Chodorow argues in *The Reproduction of Mothering* that "the very fact of being mothered by a woman generated in men conflicts over masculinity", a theoretical framework that seems to align very well with not just Bachchan's odd behaviour discussed above, but also with his own assessment of it. Or consider the case of Akhtar Hussain Raipuri who is said to have had a great "weakness" for his children and spent time reading to them and money on buying them toys, and juxtapose this against Chiara Saraceno's claim that "The man makes a definite selection among family tasks," taking on those that are "richest in symbolic meaning."

The goal here is not to point out one or the other writer whose work is relevant but more to gesture toward the fact that there is a vast literature on masculinity that has developed over the decades and some parts of it appear to resonate with the key themes of this book, but almost none of it has been engaged with, leading to a feeling that the wheel is being reinvented. If some of those bylanes of analysis are far from Pandey's own neighbourhood, there are puzzles closer to home as well. For example, why don't Partha Chatterjee's ideas on the role of the home and domestic practices in the development of nationalist thought feature more prominently in the argument being made here?

It is only in the last chapter, enigmatically titled "Ym Ylimaf", that it becomes clear that this is not the kind of dry impersonal academic book that the branding led the reader to expect. In this chapter, whose title is "My Family" written backwards, Pandey talks about his own family history all the way down to his own life and his own relationships. Confession and evasion are thought to be opposites of each other but in this chapter, we see Pandey standing at the Toba Tek Singh between the two, pulled equally from both sides.

The title of the chapter itself dramatises this conflict, encompassing, as it does, the contradictory urges to reveal and conceal. As we read this chapter, especially the culminating pages where the author serves up formulations such as "Should I not say something about my own shortcomings as a husband and a partner, despite my best intentions?" or "a history of domestic morals and practices is dangerously close to the bone", we realise that this is not an academic work but a deeply personal work.

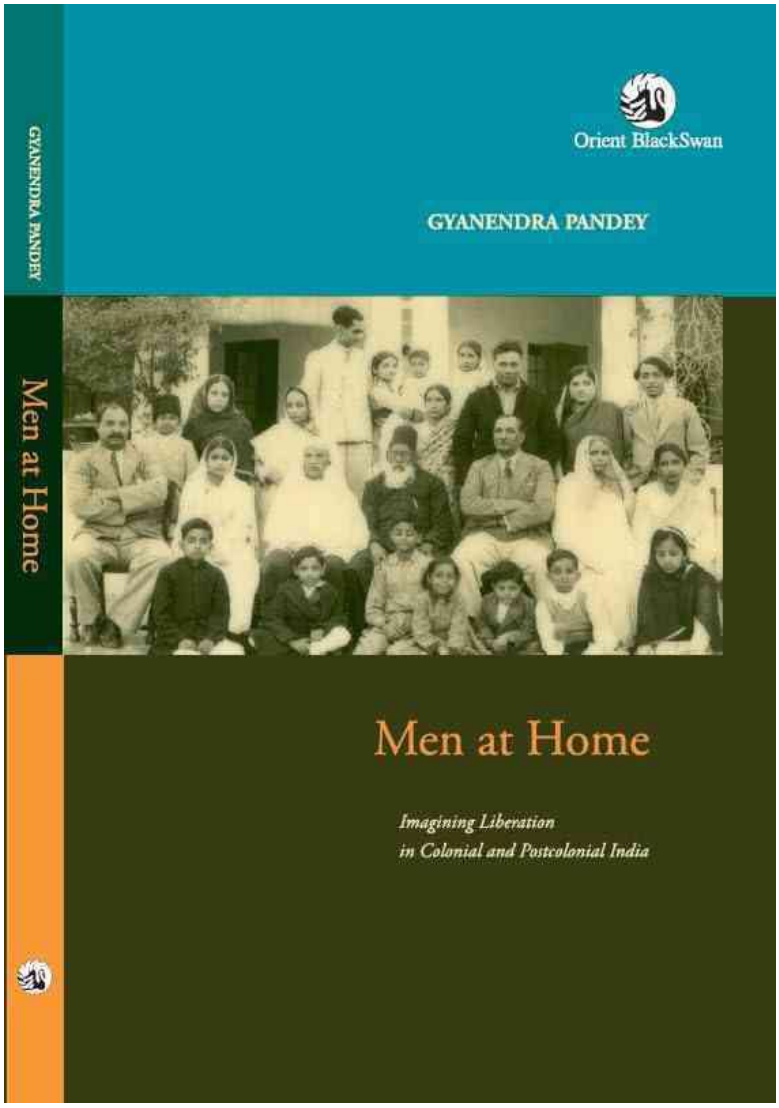
Marianne Faithfull once talked about an incident where Bob Dylan took her up to his hotel room and tried to seduce her by doing the only thing he knew how to do: writing songs. By analogy it appears here that Professor Pandey's struggles with his own male identity, the social mores and practices that shaped him, the inequities that he too benefited from have emerged in the form that he has practised all his life – a history book – even if that particular form is not perhaps the best suited for the transaction of such intimate matters.

When we look at this book as an attempt to reach inward to the writer's personal history, it begins to make more sense. The focus on men who got married a second or third time to women younger than them begins to make more sense when we learn that the writer too is married a

second time to a woman who is presumably significantly younger than himself. Some of the shortcomings of the book also make more sense now.

The finger-wagging at the male protagonists, which irritated this reader, begins to feel like displaced self-flagellation. The overly simplistic presentation of women as plaintive and suffering yet intelligent and suppressed begins to look like a guilty man's attempt to make amends. There is definitely a sense that there is something courageous in Pandey's willingness to make himself vulnerable in this way. There is something noble here, but there is also a failure: a failure to go beyond the shame and outrage felt by every South Asian man – possibly every man – who has honestly and sensitively considered the state of gender relations. I can't help feeling that the mistake Pandey made was that he looked for the answers to questions that were troubling him – important, very important, questions – in the lives of others. Instead of annotating the memoirs of others, perhaps he should have written one himself.

Amitabha Bagchi is a novelist. His latest work, Unknown City, *was published earlier this year by HarperCollins India.*



Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India, **Gyanendra Pandey, Orient Black Swan.**