

# Those spectral men

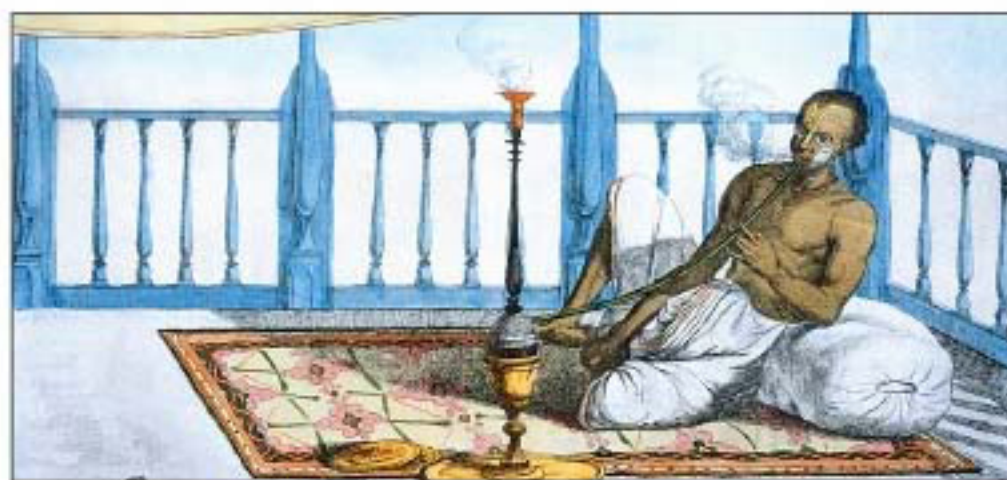
MEN AT HOME: IMAGINING  
LIBERATION IN COLONIAL  
AND POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

By Gyanendra Pandey,  
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servations are derived largely from the elite, upper-caste, autobiographical writings, Pandey reads these with much care and nuance. He also includes another category of work as “labour” from the writings of male Dalit writers and activists to present a similar case wherein a new consciousness of labour, as a route to social mobility and dignity and, hence, more than a means of survival, generated closely analogous relations with the domestic space.

The curious paradox that Pandey seeks to explore is both the centrality of home in the lives of these men and the deliberate denial of that significance in their representations of it. This had deep implications for women who were bound to them in relations of conjugality in that very space.

By the author’s own admission, the book is ambitious not just in its historiographical intervention but also in the kind of method he seeks to initiate. Did historians ever care to write in what he describes as the “visceral register” when discussing historical and sociological questions such as nationhood, gender, democracy and modernity? Why was it important to tease out every “touch and feel” of familial interaction of men at home and then counterpose these to their cerebral philosophising about their role in it in their public writings? In Pandey’s own words, “I begin a rough and ready attempt to summarize the doings and activities of men in the domestic arena through listing the



objects they touched in their daily routines. I go on to explore what men touched and did not touch through two other kinds of evidence: the words or forms of address employed by husbands and wives in daily interaction: and moods or comportment as reflected in the many kinds of male restlessness and impatience I describe...”

Pandey extracts these moods of restlessness and impatience, together with the more familiar gestures of entitlement that a Marathi Dalit writer would evocatively describe as “*navrapana*” or “husbandness” to reappraise the lives of South Asian men at home. He develops his argument through a close and careful reading of a rich autobiographical archive of men from diverse classes, castes and religious backgrounds; from Ambedkar and Gandhi to Rahul Sankrityayan and Munshi Premchand, from Harivansh Rai Bachchan to Om Valmiki, Babu Rajendra Prasad to Babu Jagjivan Ram, Akbar Husain Raipuri to Baby Kamble, Narendra Jadhav to Kausalya Baisantari. What is interesting though are the juxtapositions, wherever possible, of men’s autobiographies with those of their wives. It is through this deliberate interlacing of two versions of almost the same story that Pandey draws attention to those details that awkwardly and, at times, disappointingly reveal the fraught projects of liberation

that these men undertook in their public life.

Pandey argues that much of what is perhaps said in the book is already known from the robust historiographical tradition that has sustained scholarship on marriage, domesticity, gender, modernity and nationalism in South Asia, but what is often less discussed is the lived experience of men at home at a particular moment in history when men could make a case for the transcendence of their work and life in the public domain and therefore legitimise their “present/absent” status at home. The home remained

the space of women in the ‘natural’ order of things even when they were educated or equally able. It sustained them in their public pursuits and provided refuge when in crisis, but in the renditions of men’s lives in memoirs or autobiographies, its significance remained incidental or instrumental.

It is the traces of such histories that, Pandey argues, reveal themselves at awkward places and times. He concludes his book with a poignant reflection on the commanding yet elusive presence of his father in their lives and the secret that their home bore in its deepest recesses. This is a book likely to provoke historiographical debate but also offer an opportunity for quiet remembrance of the many men in our homes whose “spectral” presence shaped the anxious lives of those who lived with them.

Madhumita Mazumdar

Gyanendra Pandey’s new book is braided with a parallel story of ‘Men at Work’. It is this dialectical relation between work and home and the “present/absent” status of men in their conjugal and familial relations that speaks to a strand of historical inquiry of South Asian domesticity that probably had its beginnings many decades ago in the writings of Sumit Sarkar. But the men’s work Pandey refers to in this book is not the petty clerical work on offer in the colonial bureaucracy that Sarkar described as “*chakri*”. For Pandey’s protagonists, work includes professional work in the bureaucracy as well as new forms of work as writers, public intellectuals, and activists that transcended the bounds of mere trade or occupation to become a “calling” with its radically different demands on time, attention and engagement. Such work, writes Pandey, was also invested with cultural values of *tyag* or even *sanyas*. Several modern Indian male leaders, including Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, and M.K. Gandhi, even when they remained tenuously attached to their families, held up the ideal of *karma yogi*. Others fashioned themselves as “*parivrajaks*” or “*sanyasis*” who spent their lives wandering. In all such cases, men who saw themselves as public servants, or “*tyagis*”, “*karma yogis*” or “*parivrajaks*”, often expressed indifference or gestures of distraction toward the homes they inhabited.

Pandey’s book is an intimate exploration of how this new male self-fashioning of men in a space of work idealised as calling or something nobler generated a fraught articulation of their relationship with the domestic space called ‘home’. But if these ob-