

Rethink men's roles at home



Satabdi Das

review

Much has been told by feminists of the drudgery of unpaid 'reproductive labour'. Beauvoir said, "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition." One wonders what a man's take would have been on the same. In *Men at Home*, Gyanendra Pandey, the eminent historian, draws on autobiographies, memoirs, fiction and ethnographies to locate South Asian men at home and thereby micro-observes the individuals situated in their times. As a result, a scathing critique of the ambiguous presence/absence of subcontinental men, roughly during the first six-seven decades of the 20th century (i.e., before and after Partition/Independence), emerges. They seem dependent on, yet dissociated from, the 'home'. Moreover, distance from domesticity seems to be the prerequisite of the liberating 'masculine' quest — whether political, aesthetic, literary or spiritual.

The book retains a quasi-academic air by including maps in the beginning (of pre- and post-Partition India). But at times it seems to be a passionate self-castigation by a man who has realised the implications of his privileges. The cover contains a sepia picture of a joint family with men at the centre. This hypothetical central place of men in family, despite their operational absence in marital, intimate and conjugal relationship is what the book analyses.

Pandey selects his characters across genders, castes, religions and classes. There are upper caste Hindu men (Rahul Sankrityayan and Harivansh Rai Bachchan), dalit men (B.R. Ambedkar, Jagjivan Ram, Omprakash Valmiki, Narendra Jadhav, Basant Moon), Muslim men (Akhtar Hussain Rairpuri), upper-caste Hindu women (Premchand's wife Shivrani, Sankrityayan's wife Kamala), Muslim women (Khurshid Mirza, Hamida Rai) and their dalit counterparts (Ambedkar's wife Sharda Devi, Jagjivan Ram's wife Indrani, Baby

Kamble and Baisantri Kaushalya).

Pandey aptly underlines that wives have penned down memoirs only after their husbands' death, whereas Baby Kamble admitted to have skipped the details of the torture she faced in the family even after the demise of her husband, in order to save the face of the dalit community. This clearly denotes the 'normalisation' of the silence regarding physical and psychological violence in homespace in the name of the 'honour' of the family or the community.

Pandey's approach is multi-dimensional. He lists up nonchalantly the 'things' that men did and did not 'touch'; scrutinises objectively the architecture of the then domestic spaces: with an elaborate, airy outer space where men leisured, read, worked; and a less accessible, stifling inner domain where women served, toiled, procreated or suffered silently from tuberculosis (as Harivansh Rai Bachchan's first wife did). On the other hand, he ruthlessly draws on the emotions of known and unknown men and women. He men-

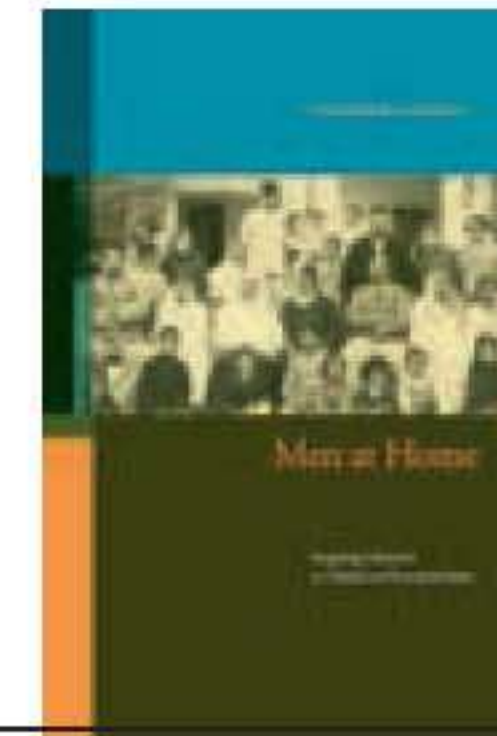
tions how Bachchan's second wife, the 'enlightened' Teji Bachchan, quit lecturership to rear children, while Bachchan went for military training simply to cope with the feeling of being emasculated by Teji's powerful presence, and narrates many such stories of male ego and female labour. Finally, he

does not shy away from unravelling how women were discriminated against in his own family. The personal is highly political, after all.

But Pandey tends to generalise at times. The forcible, overtly obligatory care of Mirza Akbar and the considerate, more nuanced, if automatic, 'infantilisation' of Babasaheb are treated at par. The content is strictly heterosexual. Nevertheless, the book should carve a niche as a study of subcontinental masculinity, of "navarapan" (husbandness), to borrow from Baby Kam-

ble's terminology, which I doubt has not changed much till date.

Satabdi Das is a teacher, short story writer and feminist. She is one of the founders of the 2024 Take Back the Night movement in West Bengal.



**MEN AT HOME:
IMAGINING LIBERATION
IN COLONIAL AND
POSTCOLONIAL INDIA**

**By GYANENDRA
PANDEY**
Orient BlackSwan
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