

Book Review

**Chowdhry, Prem. *Gender, Power, and Identity: Essays on Masculinities in Rural North India*.
New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019, 288 pages.**

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Gender, Power, and Identity is a study of rural North-Indian masculinities in a postcolonial context. Drawing on three decades of fieldwork in the North-Indian state of Haryana, Chowdhry offers insight into the dynamics of caste-class relations, the role of British colonialism, and the role of globalization in constructing the identities and practices of rural masculinities and gender relations. Chowdhry employs a socio-historical framework in situating and analyzing the construction and negotiation of masculinities and their spatial and temporal contingency to show how rural masculinities are formed by discourses of the past, which are continually interwoven within the contemporary masculine subjectivities and performativity and by processes of modernity.

Of the seven chapters in this book, four have been published before and three are original. Each chapter addresses a different, complicated set of issues, often introducing new notions, issues, and contradictions in masculinities: each is well researched and historically contextualized. Chowdhry moves chronologically with the chapters of the book. Navigating the period of British Raj in the first two chapters, she addresses postcolonial and contemporary masculinities in subsequent chapters. Throughout the book, Chowdhry shows both the masculine in the rural and the rural in the masculine. That is, she depicts the way masculinities are constituted in different rural spaces as well as the ways the rural symbolically constitutes ideas of masculinities. This notion forms the foundation of analysis for most of her chapters, though some provide textured investigations of rural masculinity in colonial Punjab and present-day Haryana. Chowdhry uses original ethnographic and empirical evidence as well as secondary literatures, scholarship, and folklore to support arguments about men and masculinities of rural North India and their relationship to

social institutions and caste, to natural resources and agricultural land, and to the village space. The book deftly touches upon the local environmental context—biophysical markers, climate conditions, water availability etcetera—and how it shapes masculinities. It links environmental factors with local masculinities, especially those belonging to farming communities. The book offers a much-needed but often neglected approach to studying contemporary rural masculinities in India.

In addressing militarized masculinities in Chapter 1 and alternative masculinities in Chapter 2, Chowdhry reflexively embarks on what could be considered a decolonial project. She traces the hegemonizing of martial castes and associated masculinities in the British Indian Army and narrates her father's life and journey as a non-normative man in colonial Punjab. Her innovation is to underscore the need to rethink dynamism in rural colonial masculinities not only from the colonizers' perspective but also from that of the colonized. This is demonstrated when Chowdhry reflects on her own positionality and retells her father's life story through an Indigenous perspective while highlighting the nuances of prevalent hetero-patriarchal practices, the construction of education as a hegemonic principle of masculinity, and its role in dehegemonizing the dominant stereotype of martial masculinities that assign high importance to virility, anger, and sexual aggression.

The book speaks to the challenges to hegemonic masculinities evident in women's subversive folk songs and the construction of unmarried men as *namard* (sexually incompetent), jeopardizing the very foundation of men's social and subjective identities. Chapters 3 and 4 address these vulnerabilities and threats to masculinities and men's attempt to remedy the same by becoming abettors and inflicting violence on those who pose a risk to the ideologies of patriarchy and caste. Chowdhry dubs this the "crisis of masculinity" (125) and highlights the role of all-male caste councils in compensating for the crisis by legitimizing and sustaining the aggressive masculine collectivity and by upholding rigid and highly regressive patriarchal structures.

Chapter 5 provides insight into the underexplored area of the geographical contingency of rural masculinities in South Asia. It evokes a feminist political ecological perspective and the notion that control over women as well as nature is a typical characteristic of rural masculinities. The author provides different examples of all-male spaces and boundaries that are not only marked by gender but also by caste, thereby limiting the participation of women and lower-caste men in those spaces. Chowdhry explains both symbolic and material

dimensions of masculinities as she argues that “these are the spaces where the power and legitimacy of masculinity are cemented and displayed... the masculinization of space means an access to and a control over resources of various kinds: material, socio-cultural, political, and ideological” (160).

Chapters 6 and 7 analyze case studies of inter-caste marriages and honour-based violence and address the ways they are perceived/handled by the judiciary, the media, and the local village councils. Honour is an “essential male concept” (193) devised for policing women’s sexuality through joint patriarchal surveillance. In the event that loss of honour happens through women’s non-conforming conduct (for example, expression of sexuality), violence against women is justified as means of reinstating the honour of the family’s men.

Despite many strengths, some areas would have benefited from more attention. Chowdhry’s passing reference to homosexuality, a rite of passage in a boy’s life, leaves a lot to be unpacked, and the practice is undertheorized, as heterosexuality is axiomatic to the book’s analysis. The issue of non-normative sexuality and non-conformist male agency evades the empirical gaze and lacks an authoritative counterbalance by excluding the voices of homosexual men. Additionally, in addressing contemporary masculinities, the book fails to engage the ways in which the prevalent neoliberal ethos of consumerism and the flux of late capitalism have impacted the life-choices men can make. It is well established that although neoliberalism and the effects of late capitalism may seemingly appear gender-neutral, they have a disproportionate impact on masculinities and ideas of manhood. In this context, Chowdhry does not address how contemporary masculinities are reconfigured and negotiated in response to the exigencies of neoliberalism.

Still, the book offers a timely addition to the growing body of research on South Asian masculinities. Though contextualized with specific references to colonial Punjab and postcolonial Haryana, the book’s representation of masculinity can be extended to a pan-Indian level for the shared historical, cultural, and social contexts. It is a significant work that increases provisions for critical engagement with the situatedness of masculinities and emphasizes the multiplicity/plurality of masculinities by focusing on their dynamism and contextual variation. A strong suit of this book lies in its lack of dependency on theoretical frameworks developed in the West as it provides a much-needed and refreshing perspective on rural masculinities. Overall, it is a compelling text for scholars of South Asian masculinities, gender studies, and cultural studies.