

## Using ethnographic methods to explore masculinities at school: reflections on participant observation with young men in New Delhi, India

### *Introduction*

High profile cases of violence against women in India over the past few years – from the gang rape of a young woman in Delhi in December 2012 to the recent hangings of young women in Uttar Pradesh – have led to claims that a ‘crisis of Indian masculinity’ is to blame for these manifestations of brutality. My PhD research explores young people’s experiences of gender and sexuality in three Delhi secondary schools; gendered and sexual violence was not an intentional area of focus for the study, but carrying out fieldwork just a few months after the Delhi gang rape case last year, it was perhaps inevitable that many young women and men discussed potential causes, solutions and effects of (actual or feared) sexual violence on their everyday lives.

In order to contextualise emerging findings from my study relating to masculinities and violence, I will begin by considering the different ways in which a ‘crisis’ of masculinity has been conceptualised in both Indian and Western literature, and how this crisis has been linked to violence. After this, I will briefly introduce my PhD study and context, and I will then focus on emerging findings relating to masculinities and violence in the schools where I worked. This will include an outline of findings relating to masculinities and violence from more ‘formal’ research settings such as focus group discussions and interviews, and then an exploration of similar findings from participant observation in more detail. Finally, I will conclude by explaining why I feel including an ethnographic approach was invaluable to the exploration of masculinities in the study.

Ethnography was adopted as one of several methods, and when considering findings from participant observation, I will also be reflecting on my embodied experience of doing research with 15-17 year old boys. In particular, I will reflect on how these boys reacted to me as a woman who looked Indian but was not-quite Indian, and who seemed like an authority figure but did not quite act like one. In turn, I will consider how my personal responses to their behaviour affected my participation, observation and interpretations within the schools. I hope that these reflections are part of the process described by Cornwall & Lindisfarne (1994), which involves linking my position as a gendered political agent, my gendered socialisation in the field, and the ways I am now repositioning myself in an academic context (1994: 45).

### *A ‘crisis’ of Indian masculinity?*

Connell (2005) has pointed out that to speak of a ‘crisis’ of masculinity ‘presupposes a coherent system of some kind, which is destroyed or restored by the outcome of the crisis’ (2005:84). Connell argues that masculinity is not a system in that sense, but in fact a ‘configuration of practice *within* a system of gender relations’ (2005:84), and so speaking of a crisis of a configuration does not work, logically. So Connell (2005) suggests that we can instead talk about ‘crisis tendencies’, and how masculinities are reconfigured around them; she points to the effects of feminism and global capitalism as examples of crisis tendencies of the gender order in the West (2005: 85).

Nevertheless, the term ‘crisis’ still seems to have considerable currency when masculinity is discussed, both in a Western and Indian context (e.g. Grieg 2011; Roy 2012; Kapur 2012; Buchbinder 2013). In the Indian context, Kapur (2012), Chatterjee (2012) and Dasgupta & Moti Gokulsingh (2013) all engage with the

concept of a crisis of Indian masculinity differently, but seem to agree that it has come about because ‘women’s rights have proliferated’, and ‘with the opening up of the market, women are more visible in the workplace’ (Kapur 2012) – in other words, in response to feminism and global capitalism, the same crisis tendencies of the gender order referred to by Connell (2005). By contrast, Roy (2012) provides a completely alternative definition – it is not Indian-masculinity-in-crisis, but crisis-in-Indian-masculinity, he argues. He declares that ‘there was never a period when masculinity was not in a crisis’, and that ‘misogyny or hatred of women constitutes a crucial building block of masculinities’ (Roy 2012).

Whether the crisis is seen as external or internal to masculinity, those discussing the Indian context see violence, and violence against women in particular, as an inevitable response by men who feel their masculinity is under threat. Kapur (2012) sees this crisis of Indian masculinity provoking anger, which in turn has led to ‘young Indian men... routinely committing gang rapes against women who are just going about their daily lives’. Meanwhile, Roy (2012) describes rape as ‘the memorialising of what can be achieved through the practices of masculinities’.

Roy (2012)’s argument that rape is an inherent characteristic of masculinity is evidently an extreme one, and I find Connell’s warning that ‘masculinity cannot be interpreted as a fixed propensity to violence’ (2005: 258) more helpful. Connell has recently reiterated the importance of ‘look[ing] hard at the social situations in which violence is happening’ (2014); I hope that the discussion of masculinities and violence among young men in Delhi schools in this paper will contribute to this process, as well as revealing whether the (variously defined) notion of a crisis of Indian masculinity is relevant to the experiences of the young people who participated in this study.

### *The study*

As I mentioned above, my PhD research focuses on young people’s experiences of and attitudes towards gender, sexuality and schooling. During the main period of fieldwork in 2013, I spent five months working with young people and their teachers in three Delhi secondary schools. A private school, a central government school and a state government school were selected in order to reflect the experiences of young people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

I worked with students in Class 11 (aged 15 – 17) and their teachers in these schools; Class 11 is the penultimate year of secondary education in the Indian system. Data collection began with 176 students across the three schools completing questionnaires, which were mainly qualitative but included questions aimed at collecting quantitative and demographic data. Students who completed questionnaires could then volunteer to participate in the next two phases of the study. This involved 5-6 girls and 5-6 boys from each school participating in mixed and single-sex focus group discussions (FGDs), and almost all of these students were then interviewed individually. Individual interviews with girls were conducted by myself, while the individual interviews with boys were carried out by my male research assistant. I also interviewed approximately eight teachers in each school, and carried out a focus group discussion with teachers in one of the schools.

In addition to these methods, I was keen to include ethnographic methods in the study, and participant observation included informal interactions with students and teachers in school, more formal classroom observations, and also reflections and fieldnotes on the general experience of ‘being there’, living and working in the Delhi.

*Talking about masculinities and violence in schools*

During focus group discussions and interviews, sexual violence was unequivocally condemned by the majority of teachers, boys and girls in the study, from cases of sexual assault and rape reported in the media to lived experiences of boys and men verbally harassing girls and women in public spaces. Some teachers referred to incidents of physical harassment in school, but girls and boys usually referred to verbal harassment or ‘passing comments’ (also known as ‘eve-teasing’), and emphasised that it was the ‘bad’ boys who behaved in this way. I was told that these ‘bad boys’ were in the majority at all the schools, which seemed to locate the practice of harassing girls and women within a dominant but undesirable form of masculinity.

However, while violence against women was viewed as ‘unacceptable’, there were forms of violence among boys which were not only widely accepted, but apparently essential to successful masculinity at school. The idea of a ‘continuum’ of acceptable and unacceptable violence among young people has recently been explored by Sundaram (2014) in a UK context, and was particularly relevant in the schools where I worked. For example, many boys referred to physical fights which occurred within the school grounds or beyond the school gates at the end of the day. These fights were often provoked by romances, either to win the affections of particular girls or when a boy had ‘trespassed’ by flirting with another’s girlfriend. Such fights seemed to reinforce the importance of protecting (female) property in order to be successfully masculine at school. However, it was apparent that not all boys aspired to these violent forms of masculinity, and one boy at the central government school bemoaned the fact that he was expected by his peers to get involved with fights even though he was worried about being punished by teachers for doing this.

Overall, from students’ and teachers’ accounts in FGDs and interviews, it seemed that violence was prevalent and somewhat inevitable in boys’ lives. One girl in the state government school neatly summed this up in the following quotation:

Ma’am, it’s alright. [Boys] do not even cry when they get slapped. It’s okay for them, it’s a regular thing for them. They even get slapped at home, and they get slapped at school too, so this is not at all bad for them

(Rani, state government school)

*Observing (and participating in) masculinities and violence at school*

As mentioned above, I carried out participant observation both through formal classroom observations and more informal interactions with students and teachers in the schools. To some extent, participant observation confirmed much of what I had been told about boys’ behaviour in the three schools in more formal research contexts. In terms of violence that had been framed as ‘acceptable’, I observed plenty of play-fighting between boys, usually when teachers were not present:

[...] After English ma’am had gone out, Leela and Tornado went to the front of the room to do their class monitor duties. One of the boys stood up as if to leave the classroom, and Tornado went to stop him, blocking the boy with his body, putting his hands out & pushing him lightly. Towards the back of the classroom [...] one boy hit another, and a loud shout went up from the boys [...]. Another boy thumped his neighbour on the back, quite hard, and three boys sitting at the back of the classroom turned and shouted in my direction, appealing to me as if I was a cricket umpire

(Classroom observation notes – private school, 11D, 10.12.13)

This physicality and (what I read to be) mock-fighting between boys seemed to confirm the associations between masculinity, physical strength and violence that were discussed by students and teachers in more formal research contexts. Importantly, these acts of play-fighting seemed to enable everyday performances of masculine strength and competition among peers that were safer than more violent, 'real' confrontations.

In terms of violence against women – which was framed as 'unacceptable' during FGDs and interviews – I thankfully did not observe any physical manifestations of sexual violence while I was in the schools. However, I did observe and experience verbal harassment from boys while in school. Particularly when spending whole days with each class, certain girls would take it upon themselves to act as my guides, interpreters and/or protectors, and it was initially through these girls that I became aware that boys were also targeting me:

[...] Akira told me that the boys had been passing comments about me, so I asked her what they had been saying. She said "oh, these bad things" – I pressed her to give me an example, and she said "oh, like *vo maal lagta hai*", which she translated as "oh, she's looking good" – but "not in a nice way, they're saying it in a bad way"

(Fieldnotes, 24.08.13)

Initially, I struggled with the attentions of the more aggressive, 'bad' boys in the schools. My early reactions to this attention were particularly affected by my irritation at generally being stared at in public spaces, an everyday reality for women who move around Delhi on their own. Additionally, during August and September last year (the first two months of fieldwork), the Delhi gang rape case was being widely covered again in the media in the build-up to the sentencing of the accused young men. My own emotional reaction to this case, and to a particularly powerful piece on the case by Jason Burke in the UK Guardian (2013), prompted angry (and not particularly coherent) reflections on the harassment I experienced in the schools, and the broader context of sexual violence in India:

[...] walking back to the hostel after reading this [Burke article] I realised how in the midst of all this I am – suddenly I felt both startled and angry when I noticed a man staring at me as I walked past the metro station, which is something I had become used to over these past weeks [...] And then I thought about the 'eve-teasing' I've been getting myself in the schools [...] Shaan saying loudly to me in the corridor in front of his friends: "Ma'am you're looking gorgeous in Indian dress!", and then one of the boys in 11B shouting "Ma'am you're looking gorgeous!" across the classroom.

[...] Thinking back on my varying reactions to their behaviour, [...] I want my next reaction to be more along the lines of [...] pointing out in the most eloquent and convincing manner possible that they are part of the problem, that they are implicated when they behave like this and think it's okay to behave like this, as if girls and women are just a joke, or just cardboard cut-outs which they can use to exert power and feel so fucking dominant.

(Fieldnotes, 12.09.13)

While already conscious of the importance of reflexivity and positionality in feminist research praxis, being on the receiving end of 'eve-teasing' in the schools led me to further reflect on the embodied nature of observation, participation and interpretation when adopting ethnographic methods. In contrast to the more formal qualitative research methods adopted in the study, which can be challenging enough but still

provide a protective barrier between the ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’, ethnographic methods left me feeling more exposed and vulnerable in the field.

However, this exposure and vulnerability could also be extremely productive, and personal experiences of one of the key aspects of my research – gendered, sexualised interactions in school – were highly revealing both in substantive and methodological terms. As time passed and I became more comfortable within the school environments, I felt much more equipped to deal with and respond to boys’ attentions. Additionally, not all boys reacted to me in a purely aggressive way, and it was crucially through ethnographic methods that I gained further insights into performances of masculinities in school.

Connell (2000) refers to the domination of the ‘heterosexual “romance” pattern of gender relations’ (2000: 161) in secondary schools, and I found myself being incorporated into this by boys in all the schools. As part of ongoing attempts to enact a ‘co-operative and reciprocal exchange’ by ‘giving some of myself’ in a feminist approach to research (Oakley 1981), I often showed students pictures of my family and my partner on my phone – it was on a day of classroom observations in the state government school that this resulted in the most dramatic consequences:

[...] Abhishek and a group of the 11A boys came out to the yard, and Abhishek said, “show them the photo ma’am, I am much better than your boyfriend!”. I said that I wasn’t so sure about that, but got my phone out to show the other boys, since I had already shown the girls. As I did, Abhishek insisted again, “See, I’m much better!”, but there was a collective “No!” accompanied by laughter from the rest of the boys. “Ma’am”, said Abhishek, “I think you should leave him and be my girlfriend”, which prompted further laughter.

[...] Roy and a few other boys appeared in front of Abhishek and the other 11A boys [...] Suddenly Roy pushed Abhishek, who got up and started pushing him back and shouting something in Hindi. “What’s happening?” I asked Kajol. “Actually ma’am, they are fighting because Roy wants to propose you, and Abhishek is saying no, he has already proposed you”.

(Classroom observation notes – state government school, 11A, 22.11.13)

I found the idea of two teenage boys competing for my affections surreal to say the least – but this episode suggests that, as Connell (2000) has noted in other contexts, ‘heterosexual success [was] a formidable source of peer group prestige’ which fed into the hierarchy of masculinities at this school (2000: 161). Although I did not observe boys fighting over their female classmates in the same way, my personal experience of this seemed to confirm the stories told about similarly motivated fights during interviews. I can only speculate on why the boys sought to incorporate me into this romance framework; for example, my positionality as a ‘Westernized’ Indian woman may have led to a perception of me as a more viable target, or these performances of courtship may have been specifically intended subvert my position as a potential (female) authority figure.

### *Conclusions – a ‘crisis’ of Indian masculinity at school?*

Including an ethnographic approach undoubtedly enriched both my experience of carrying out research and the findings from the study as a whole. Quantitative and qualitative data pointed to links between masculinities and violence at school, but the way students interacted with me, what I was told and what I saw during participant observation added depth and complexity to the picture.

However, I also found that there were considerable limitations to adopting ethnography as one of several methods rather than as an overall approach to the study. For example, carrying out only three days of

classroom observations in each school (during which I spent the whole day with different Class 11 sections, inside and outside the classroom) meant that students did not 'get used to me' in the same way they may have done if I had become a more regular presence in their classrooms. By remaining something of a novelty, I consistently disturbed the environment I was observing – had this not been the case, perhaps I would have observed the 'heterosexual romance pattern' playing out between boys and girls rather than being implicated in it myself, or alternatively, gained further insights into patterns of homosocial interactions and gendered boundaries in the schools.

Overall, and in spite of these limitations, emerging findings from the study suggest that the concept of a crisis of Indian masculinity may not be particularly relevant to young people's lived experiences, particularly if masculinities and violence are linked as a reaction to external phenomena (such as feminism or global capitalism). It did not, for example, seem that boys' involvement in violence at school was provoked by their reactions to women's empowerment, or by fears related to competing with girls for future job security. Additionally, defining a crisis by positioning violence as inherent to masculinity (Roy 2012) also seems unhelpful – not all masculinities at school required exhibitions of violence, even if most boys were compelled to at least negotiate forms of violence simply by virtue of being boys.

Kapur (2012), Roy (2012) and Dasgupta & Moti Gokulsingh (2013) all point to violence against women as the key manifestation of a crisis of Indian masculinity; this was emphatically defined as unacceptable violence by both boys and girls who participated in the study, although it was apparent that verbal forms of harassment were prevalent in the schools. It was also apparent that links between dominant masculinity and violence persisted in boys' everyday interactions with each other, and through direct and indirect interactions with girls.

It was through participant observation that it became increasingly clear the term 'crisis' was insufficient to reflect the complex ways in which assumptions about violence and masculinities were embedded in boys' day to day lives. Moreover, by personally implicating me in gendered and sexualised interactions with boys in school, ethnographic methods offered an insight into both the complexities of the interplay between masculinities and violence, and the ambiguities of researching this area.

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