Will #MeToo Help Us Become Better Men?

BY RAHUL JAYARAM  NOV. 12, 2018

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By and large, Indian men have maintained radio silence over the #MeToo movement. Right or wrong, the fear of being named as a “harasser” from someone in their past may be one reason for it. But even if they aren’t mala fide predators, most heterosexual men are woefully inept at formulating their views about #MeToo. They’re only partially educated in the subjects of sex, sexual harassment, and woman-man relations. Their silence is complex, and our glorious “traditions” may have played a role in them losing their voice.

For common men, it’s an uneasy-but-constructive confusion to have. Discomfort is the beginning of introspection. One hopes this phase will lead to stock-taking, and provide men the opportunity to self-reform and become new, more attractive men. Experiencing the emotional frontiers of their imagination may hopefully alter their equations with women, and their self-perception and self-awareness.

All of this hinges on a question very few people think to ask: What do common men think of sex? Is it for pleasure? Is it for love? Is it lust? Is it routine? Is it something creative that needs the imagination of its participants? Is it to keep one’s caste, community, religion, family, national
bloodline alive? What is its purpose, both private and social? How does one cope with it if one doesn’t get sex, or enough of it? Is sexual frustration a stigma? What does one do if one’s partner says no to sex? What is her reality like?

That’s a lot of questions, which most men don’t ask themselves. Sure, there are no clear answers for them. But the current impasse at which we’ve arrived pushes each man to grapple with them. And these are solutions each man has to arrive at gradually.

At the risk of generalising, let me state that most men tend to view most women sexually most of the time – inside their heads, if not in action. This way is hard-wired into the mentality of most heterosexual males across many world societies. But this isn’t a man’s fault. However problematic it might be, it’s also an expression of body stimulus which is difficult to envisage in any other way. Also, without being conscious, men are “born into” and perhaps fashioned into thinking like this about women. Now, of course female desire and sexual freedom exists; it just takes on a different expression. Simply put, sexual attraction works differently across genders.

Given this situation, it’s no wonder in most societies of the world, especially in orthodox cultures of the Indian subcontinent, marriages occur early. To a good extent, it exists to give social sanction to sex. Thus, women and men – not entirely ready in their minds but of legal marriageable ages – cave in to wedlock owing to sexual and social pressures. Often, the union is more out of obligation to tradition than individual desire. Marriage and the family system are the only socially accepted ways to obtain physical intimacy; this norm is a social disaster.
Institutions such as marriage and family are revered as much as religion in our part of the world. Marriages aren’t only meant to get two lovebirds hitched; they also aim to dictate and control sexual autonomy. And encountering the social system of marriage and family ensures that sex becomes a form of power for men over women. Barring some exceptions, many of the purported Indian abusers emerge from conventional settings – the cradle of parampara, sanskriti, rivayat. Thus two things have been common: A relative absence of female-male exchange as free and equal individuals outside of the surveillance of family and marriage; and because of the former, an inability to divorce notions of power from sex.

In most cultures, tradition is difficult to subvert. It moulds itself often to changing circumstances. But it’s open for calculated negotiation, and that’s why it survives and always has acceptability. Sex is already one of our ongoing battles. It’s now single men and women versus tradition, pushing for non-marital interaction between the sexes to take place, even compel tradition to accord it legitimacy. And, the same tradition seems ill-equipped to grasp ideas of gender equity and individual sexual desire.

Tradition has robbed common men of understanding this experience. Men who don’t know how to deal with their sexual fears and frustrations, find issues like these call their manhood into question. Thus, tradition has to update itself and step into the conversation, for there are female and male dissenters brewing. Here, India’s counterparts can learn from other countries. Once the #MeToo revelations hit the western world, Pope Francis called out the “machismo” culture that prevailed there. Recently, Scotland became the first country in the world to undertake steps to address issues of sexual-diversity sensitisation and understanding LGBTQ issues at
school level – one hazards education about sex, sexual harassment etc must be afoot. Also, like the Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous, India and the world needs an equivalent body that deals with matters of sexual frustration: To create an atmosphere to talk about these things with freedom.

Finally, though, the overlords of tradition have tough new questions to handle. One of them relates to the freedom to desire. Is it kosher for women and men to think of it as self-fulfilling? Is it okay to consider sex as an end in itself, without any messy social or personal attachments? How does tradition accommodate that? In any case, 21st century urban Indians are increasingly taking a different view of these things. Thus, this crisis is a great chance to redeem tradition too. If sustained, #MeToo presents the prospect for common men to become better new men – to reshape love, sex, romance, and yes, even marriage.

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