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NAVIGATING SPACES OF POWER: MALE PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN INDIA

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Abstract: The politics of gender and sexuality within political activism is a complex and contested field and words that resonate differently in different political and cultural contexts. influenced by interlocking identities, ideologies and interests. The place of women and LGBTQ+ people in, and their contribution to,gender rights activism has been empirically documented; however, little has been done to analyze how male activists think and act about gender and sexuality. One of them would be a bridge to that gap by the following studies: exploring the views of male activists from diverse ideological and activist contexts in North India.The study fills in that gap by exploring how North Indian male activists negotiate feminist and queer politics, framing the analysis around masculinity, male allyship, and intersectionality. Using focus groups discussion (FGDs), in-depth interviews and field observations, it investigates how caste, religion, political ideology, and activist location impact male participation in gender justice struggles. Results demonstrate a continuum of engagement—from actively questioning and challenging patriarchy through practice to upholding hierarchical forms of masculinity even within progressive strands of mobilization. In analysing their motivations, paradoxes and ideological frictions, the article provides an account of the process through which masculinities are shaped and challenged in a field of political action, and what this involves for transformative feminist and queer politics.

Keyword: gender, sexuality, political activism, male perspective, India, inclusivity

Introduction

The study is focused on what it means to be a man with feminism, but not in opposition to it, is one of the constant questions that appear in the current discourse of gender justice in India. The question is especially pressing within activist spaces, in which solidarity is not only demanded but (more problematically) demanded of. In the last couple of decades, feminist and queer movements in India became much aligned, transforming the political imagination about sexuality, patriarchy and life in the streets. But even on this changing terrain do men activists still play a troubled role. Their existence is mostly a thin line between supporting and appropriating, listening and leading, allyship and assertion. women nonetheless, women who struggle alone in taking care of their children and family amidst the various social discrimination and poverty.

Background

The article is a product of fieldwork among male participants of gender and political movements in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Delhi. It was the product of a growing uneasiness expressed by women and queer activists in the same spaces: the feeling that some men seem to talk the language of gender justice with skill, but their policies leave the workings of patriarchy untouched. Lots of men desperately want to engage in the fight to achieve equality, but do not have the resources and/or inclination to investigate their own privilege (Sinha, 1995). There are others who strategically deploy feminist vocabularies in order to entrench hierarchies even within areas that are meant to be radical.

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As a researcher embedded in these movements and trained in feminist social work, I approach this inquiry from a position of partial belonging. My aim is not to indict men broadly, but to understand how masculinities are shaped, challenged, and maintained within activist work. Drawing on R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, feminist critiques of male allyship, and intersectional insights from Dalit, queer, and Bahujan feminisms, I examine how male activists engage with questions of power, sexuality, and justice. Rather than offering a moral verdict, the article maps a spectrum of masculinities—from those that resist domination, to those that subtly reproduce it.

Research Questions:

- What does allyship mean in practice?
- How do caste, class, and ideology shape the ways men participate in gender justice?
- And what does it take for masculinities to become not just less violent, but actively liberatory?

Conceptualising Masculinity, Ally ship, and Power

It is very important to understand the concept of masculity to obtain a determined result. To understand the role of men in gender and sexuality-based activism, one must begin by asking: what kinds of masculinities operate in these spaces, and to what ends? The theoretical vocabulary around masculinity has evolved considerably, with R.W. Connell's (2005) notion of *hegemonic masculinity* offering a foundational lens. Connell argues that masculinities are not static identities but relational configurations of power—performed, policed, and maintained through cultural and institutional norms. In India, this takes on layered significance, as caste, religion, and regional identity intersect to produce multiple—and often conflicting—masculine ideals.

At the heart of the message, though, is the idea of allyship, which is vexed. This has been warned of by feminist theorists such as Kavita Krishnan (2016) and Srila Roy (2020) who warn of the instrumentalisation of feminist language on the part of men who do not analyse their own privilege. The research undertaken by Roy on common masculinities in India can be a good starting point to this study as it focuses on how ordinary performances of gender are under the influence of caste, class, and media representations. This challenge to a collapse of identities and a demand to a situated intersectionality, to map the contradictions between identities, is something that has a particular relevance in the case of North India where caste privilege and gender progressivism may not be surprising to find their coexistence within the same political space.

Many of these activist networks in India, especially in feminist and LGBTQ+ activism, are concerned not with the question of whether or not men are present, though; but how. The problem is just that, as Rao (2012) proposes in his ethnographic memoirs of male feminists, navigating between the roles without reproducing the same system is a challenge in a manner that is likely to perpetuate the kind of feminism that subordinate the lot. The problem this poses is even more salient within the case of queer and trans inclusion where the implicit shaping of masculinity and by extension heteronormativity is least likely to be challenged by male allies.

Lastly, intersectionality, made widely known by KimberlC Crenshaw (1989) and applied specifically to India by academic representatives such as Uma Chakravarti (2003) and Anupama Rao (2005), guides the total analysis. The intersectionality in this project is not taken as a list of these identities as a way

of indexing identities, but as an analysis of the specific construct of masculinity (as applied to upper-caste and Dalit men, urban and rural activists, secular and religious ideologues, etc.). Fault lines are real, not just ideas (Srivastava, 2020). The fault lines not only determine who gets a voice heard, who becomes a leader, and whose activism is accepted, but also what is voiced, what leadership is embraced, and what activism is perceived as legitimate.

Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative field study that was carried out between 2023 and 2025 in the territories of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Delhi, which are characterized by a wide variety of political cultures, the paradigm of caste relations, and the experience of gender-related mobilization. The paper aimed at analysing how male activists imagine their place within the feminists and queer movements and how their social location, (determined by caste, class, religion, and political ideology) has given them the space to enter these movements.

A triangulation strategy was embraced to bring out this complexity. The sampled population included 22 to 50 years old male activists:

- 10 in-depth interviews with male activists across ideological and organizational affiliations,
- 5 focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 30 participants, and
- A survey administered to 100 male activists to identify broader trends in perceptions and practices.

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, beginning with key informants from gender-focused NGOs, student groups, and grassroots networks. The sample included men affiliated with mainstream political parties, independent left collectives, Dalit-Bahujan rights organizations, and queer advocacy groups.

The interviews and FGDs were guided by semi-structured protocols, allowing flexibility to follow emergent themes such as emotional labor, experiences of backlash, or conflicts around leadership. Field notes were also maintained to capture non-verbal dynamics and unstructured observations from protests, meetings, and public forums (Garber, 2005). The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis, guided by concepts such as *hegemonic masculinity*, *performative allyship*, and *intersectionality*. Survey responses were processed using basic descriptive statistics to contextualise the patterns emerging from qualitative insights.

All participants were informed about the study's aims, and verbal or written consent was obtained prior to data collection. Pseudonyms have been used to protect identities. Ethical considerations were particularly important when engaging with LGBTQ+ activists and those from marginalised caste locations, whose participation often involves significant political risk.

Ethical Consideration

Along with other questions that have continued to appear in the modern discourse of gender justice in India, a common question that has continued to arise includes this: what does it mean to be a man with feminism? This question is especially urgent in activist contexts, in which solidarity is contested and maintained at the same time. In the last 20 years, feminist and queer movements in India have grown tremendously, transforming political imagination of sexuality, patriarchy and social life. But in this new landscape the role of the male activist is a contentious one (Rana, 2020). They are in a dilemma where their presence is regarded as that of a fine and thin line in being supportive but also taking away. On being listeners and leaders in supporting and being an ally.

The present article is a result of field-work with male activists participating in gender and political movements in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Delhi. It was done in response to a nagging unease that women and queer activists in the spheres have chronicled: the notion that some men talk the language of gender justice just fine, but in practice proving only to leave the patriarchal systems in place (Mohanty, 2003). Lots of men are genuinely interested in joining the fight of equality but they lack either the tools, or the will to look critically at their own advantage. Feminist vocabularies are used by others as a strategic reinforcement of hierarchies even by those spaces that may be called radical.

FINDINGS & THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Conceptualising Masculinity, Allyship, and Power

To understand the role of men in gender and sexuality-based activism, one must begin by asking: what kinds of masculinities operate in these spaces, and to what ends? The theoretical vocabulary around masculinity has evolved considerably, with R.W. Connell's (2005) notion of hegemonic masculinity offering a foundational lens. Connell argues that masculinities are not static identities but relational configurations of power—performed, policed, and maintained through cultural and institutional norms. In India, this takes on layered significance, as caste, religion, and regional identity intersect to produce multiple—and often conflicting—masculine ideals.

Michael Kimmel (2000) further explores how men are socialised into systems that reward dominance, competitiveness, and emotional restraint. Kimmel's work highlights how even "well-intentioned" men can unconsciously replicate patriarchal dynamics under the guise of progressivism. His idea of soft patriarchy—where men appear to support gender equality but continue to hold decision-making power—resonates deeply with the ambivalence seen among some male activists in Indian movements.

This work is also based on the approach introduced by Nivedita Menon (2012) to feminism as a political position not an identity, a refusal to accept the logic of patriarchy, which was seen as commonsense. Another key to identifying the hypocrisies of male allyship is Emmenis Menon critique of institutional and cultural patriarchy, even in regions that self-style as radical ones (Eschle, 2004). The main issue is that stating that it is not by force that men enter the area of feminism and that it does not necessarily lead to change but it involves the question whether their entry in the feminist area is allowing a redistribution of power or only a relocation with more palatable shapes and forms.

The idea of allyship is essentially what it focuses on, however, it is problematic. Feminist thinkers Kavita Krishnan (2016) or Srila Roy (2020) warn about the way feminist discourse is used by men who do not analyze their privilege. The work has been done by Roy on ordinary masculinities in India that will serve as a good starting point of this research and she highlights aspects of how everyday gender performances are constructed through caste, classes and media representations (Gamson & Moon, 2004). Her appeal to situated intersectionality a kind that does not reduce identities to a unitary whole but plots their inconsistencies is particularly apposite when one is working in a setting such as in North India where caste privileges and gender liberalism can all too readily be found sharing common political ground.

The question in activist networks in India, especially in feminist are organized and in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer movement, has erupted not around the question of whether men are in the room, but how they are in the room. It is argued by Rao (2012) in his ethnographic piece on male feminists that one has to consider the role, but not do the same as the structures of dominance feminism aims to eradicate. This problem is even more highlighted with the terms of queer and trans inclusion, when the normative set of masculinity, including heteronormativity, is not questioned at all by male allies (Edström et al., 2015).

Together, these frameworks help us read male participation in gender justice work not as a monolithic category but as a contested field. Masculinity is not simply what men are, but what they do, and how their doing intersects with power, ideology, and the bodies they move through the world with.

Survey Snapshot: Indicators and Insights

Table: Summary of Survey Indicators on Masculinity and Gender Justice (n = 100)

Survey Indicator	% of Respondents Agreeing
Support gender equality in principle	85%
Believe men should have leadership roles in feminist movements	68%
Prefer allyship role over leadership	21%
Feel pressure to conform to traditional masculinity	72%

Experienced backlash for feminist support	60%
Believe caste affects perception of allyship	76%
Believe queer issues should be included in gender justice discourse	54%

FGD Highlights

- Tension in allyship: Many male participants described feeling caught between ideals of gender equality and their ingrained expectations of leadership and control. In mixed-gender FGDs, men often performed allyship—carefully modulating tone, vocabulary, and body language. However, in all-male FGDs, the same individuals articulated more conservative beliefs, particularly around women's attire, behavior, and emotional expression (Champagne, 2018). These contradictions often surfaced without the men themselves perceiving them as contradictory.

- Peer policing: Several participants admitted that they or their peers mock other men who express vulnerability or endorse feminist principles too strongly. One man shared, "You're laughed at if you talk too much about women's rights—people say you're trying to impress someone or have no self-respect."

- Caste-coded credibility: Dalit and Bahujan male activists frequently shared that even when they echo the same feminist principles as upper-caste men, they are more likely to be scrutinized or dismissed. This discrepancy was rarely acknowledged by their upper-caste peers.Dalit and Bahujan male activists often noted that their allyship was questioned more harshly than that of upper-caste peers.

5.2 Interview Themes

- Hegemonic Projects of Masculinity as Responsibility: Functioning in opposition to the more vicious projects of domination, masculinity was recast among grassroots Dalit activists as moral responsibility, grounded upon the histories of caste struggles. They also tended to consider gender justice to be part and parcel of their social justice agendas.

- Masculinity as strategy/strength: On the other hand, the strategy/strength of masculinity was reflected by several upper-caste male activists who framed their roles with regards to defense or provision of directions to the movement. The logics of paternity were widely reproduced even by those who sympathised with feminist goals: "The head must lead, even in the case of women being targeted," one of the female students leaders in Bihar said.

- Dual discourse: the presence/absence of women: When absence of women is made explicit in the interviews, there will be a distinct expression of a different one in the presence of women. When talking about single-gender conversations, some of the activists openly criticized the choice of clothes that women have or associated empowerment with being modest and disobedient. These opinions hardly came out during a mixed environment implying performing the feminist alignment subconsciously (or unreported).

- Social conformity despite awareness: A few interviewees admitted they consciously maintain traditional masculine stances to avoid alienation from peers or family, even when they personally believe in feminist principles. "We're aware, but the society we live in doesn't allow us to act differently without consequences," one respondent noted.in those exposed to feminist/queer theory or movement training.

5.3 Masculinity as Contested Ground in Activist Spaces

In the activist landscapes of North India, masculinity is both a resource and a constraint—something male activists mobilise, wrestle with, and sometimes struggle to name. Whether in grassroots Dalit rights groups or student-led political fronts, the performance of masculinity often shapes who gets to speak, who gets to lead, and whose allyship is accepted or resisted.

Interviews with activists revealed two broad but overlapping frames through which masculinity was understood: as power and as responsibility (Allwood & Wadia, 2004). The first, more dominant frame, emerged most clearly among upper-caste men affiliated with formal political structures. For them, masculinity was often described in terms of strength, leadership, and strategic acumen. A 30-year-old activist from a student party in Uttar Pradesh put it bluntly:

"*Feminist politics is fine, but leadership still needs direction. Men know how to handle pressure—this is our role.*"

This view reflects what Connell (2005) defines as *hegemonic masculinity*: a dominant form that legitimises male authority and casts gender equality as noble, yet always requiring male stewardship. Even within progressive parties, this framing persisted. A 34-year-old activist from a right-leaning campus collective echoed this sentiment:

In contrast, a second group primarily from Dalit, Bahujan, and human rights organisations articulated masculinity as an ethical stance rooted in care, accountability, and political responsibility. A 26-year-old Dalit activist from Bihar reflected:

"*Masculinity doesn't mean control—it means accountability. If we don't question patriarchy, we reproduce it. It's the same logic as caste dominance.*"

This reframing aligns with Srila Roy's (2020) notion of *situated intersectionality*, where caste and class do not merely intersect with gender but fundamentally reconfigure it. Among these activists, masculinity was not to be erased, but to be redefined.

In FGDs, these differing positions often collided. Some participants viewed allyship as an act of *standing behind* feminist leadership, while others viewed it as *standing alongside*, if not *in front of*. The result was frequent tension, especially in coalitions involving both grassroots feminists and mainstream party-affiliated male activists.

A particularly telling moment came during an FGD in Lucknow, where a male participant who had introduced himself as "pro-feminist" was challenged by a queer Dalit activist:

"*You say you're pro-feminist, but you've spoken more than any woman here. Allyship is not about echoing our lines louder.*"

Such encounters were not uncommon. Many male activists struggled with the expectations placed on them: to speak, but not over; to support, but not direct; to listen, but not disappear. The ambiguity of these roles made masculinity itself a space of negotiation.

Survey data mirrored these divides. While 72% of respondents agreed that men have a role to play in gender justice movements, only 34% believed that role should *exclude* leadership. Among upper-caste respondents, support for feminist leadership dropped to 38%, compared to 63% among those from SC/ST backgrounds (Cornwall et al., 2011). This data points to caste privilege as a key mediator of how masculinity is understood and enacted.

Several respondents also described the emotional cost of challenging dominant masculinity. A 31-year-old leftist activist from Rajasthan noted:

"*If you show vulnerability or speak about gender too much, you're mocked. Even within our 'progressive' groups, you get labelled as soft, not serious.*"

Here, Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) idea of *symbolic violence* becomes useful: masculinity is not merely performed but policed, often through ridicule and exclusion. Male activists who deviate from dominant gender norms face backlash not just from conservative spaces, but from within their own circles.

And yet, this backlash also marks the boundaries of possibility. Several respondents described these tensions as *necessary frictions*—proof that something was being unsettled. A young Dalit queer activist from Bihar said:

"*The discomfort men feel when they are asked to step back—that's where feminism begins for them. That's the first confrontation with power.*"

These words return us to the central tension of this article: masculinity, when left unexamined, often reproduces the hierarchies that feminist and queer politics seek to dismantle. But masculinity, when interrogated—when made vulnerable—can also become a site of transformation.

5.4 Allyship or Leadership? The Politics of Male Participation

One of the most polarising themes that emerged from the field was the question: *what is the appropriate role for men in feminist and queer movements?* While most male activists in the study expressed a

commitment to gender justice, their understanding of that commitment—and how it should be enacted—varied sharply.

Across interviews and FGDs, three distinct positions surfaced: men as allies, men as co-leaders, and men as strategic drivers of change. Each position revealed not only how masculinity is performed in activist spaces, but also how power circulates, even in efforts to dismantle it.

The third group—smaller but vocal—saw men as necessary agents of change, especially in conservative regions. Their argument was that since men are more likely to be heard in patriarchal societies, they must take the lead in challenging sexism. A senior activist from Bihar put it plainly:

"*In many places, women can't even speak in public. Men must speak for them—at least until they have space. Without men, nothing will move.*"

While this may sound pragmatic, it risks reinforcing what Kavita Krishnan (2016) warns against: the instrumental use of feminist discourse to consolidate male legitimacy. In this frame, allyship becomes a temporary holding position—a bridge to a future where men still dictate the terms of change.

Survey responses mirrored these divides. While 70% of respondents supported men's active involvement in feminist work, only 21% endorsed non-leadership roles. Nearly 40% believed that men should lead alongside women, and 10% argued that men should take charge of feminist advocacy in contexts where women face repression. The remaining 29% expressed uncertainty or changing views.

Importantly, attitudes towards allyship were shaped by social location. Male activists from Dalit and Bahujan backgrounds were more likely to emphasise listening, responsibility, and shared learning. Those from upper-caste or politically elite backgrounds were more likely to frame leadership as entitlement or necessity. As one grassroots queer activist in Patna observed:

"*Caste privilege shows up in how men join feminist spaces. Some assume they know more, just because they read the theory. But lived experience isn't a book.*"

These observations echo the caution given by Srila Roy (2020) that allyship has to be taken to be intersectional. Allyship is not a simple thing, it is defined by your experiences, it is conditioned by where you be and how you can enter the room. When a Dalit joins a feminist campaign, his reception might be very different to that of an upper-caste man who has access to the institutions and political capital.

Practically, most male revolutionists were struggling to cope with undisclosed and unclear roles- when to talk and when to take the back seat, when to stand and when to think. This has been termed as frustrating to some and as part of growth to others. A 28-year old activist in one of the queer support groups in Varanasi responded:

"*I had an idea that being an ally implies being vocal. It is now apparent to me that it is all about responsibility. It is not enough to quote feminists, you must learn to unlearn the things that brought an agenda due to Feminists.*"

This maturation- advocacy to accountability- is a finer yet very important change. It implies that allyship is not a role or a landing spot, but an unceasing action, one that is, emotionally taxing, intellectually humility, and it involves space-making.

In most aspects, this resembles the performativity of gender that Butler (1990) wrote about not only as a collection of features, but as repeated activities within systems of power. Allyship, in this case, is performative in its own ways and the political effectiveness of allyship lies in the identity of those who do it, how they do it and with which intentions.

5.5 When Masculinity Pushes Back: Barriers from Within and Beyond

Because allyship is also about humility, emotional labour and the ability to give up space, someone must ask why men cannot devote themselves to it more completely. In each of the field sites, it was evident that barriers to active involvement in feminist, queer politics was not just external or ideological, but internal, cultural, and strongly gendered too.

For many activists, traditional masculinity acted as both a personal hurdle and a collective pressure. The idea that "real men" should be assertive, rational, and emotionally detached persisted across activist settings, including within groups that publicly championed gender equality. A 31-year-old activist from a progressive student organisation in Rajasthan noted:

"*You talk too much about feminism, and suddenly you're the soft one, the unserious one. They don't say it directly, but it's there in how they stop inviting you to planning meetings.*"

Such unsaid omissions are addressed by Pierre Bourdieu (1998) when he discusses the symbolic violence of daily, unannounced affirmations of power hierarchy that support dominant conventions. Even collectives that operate under the guise of egalitarianism have masculinity enforcing its boundaries. Even the demonstration of vulnerability or allyship may be viewed as a liability on the job instead of the asset.

This was particularly vivid on the part of male activists with political-influencing families or those of higher castes. A lot of them reported having to struggle between the progressive ideology and the expectations of their peers or families. A 34years old Bihar activist told:

"*My colleagues say I've been 'feminised'. My uncle told me that gender activism is not for real men—it's for NGOs and Western-funded people. You either become silent or you perform toughness to stay relevant.*"

In this case, masculinity is no longer what men are endowed with, instead, they are supposed to take it as a situation on ground depending on their location. The feminist discourse is welcome at the workshops, it is however silenced at the family dinners or during a political rally. This contradiction, performance in the public eyes and expense in the backroom, is hard to maintain consistent engagement with feminist work.

More incriminating were the experience of queer activists and male supporters in marginalised caste spaces who regularly encountered multidimensional resistance. A community based organisation in Uttar Pradesh told a Dalit queer activist:

"*When I speak about feminism or queer rights, people don't just question my politics—they question my masculinity, my caste, my legitimacy. They ask who gave me the right to speak*."

Such responses reveal the intersections of patriarchy, casteism, and heteronormativity. As Judith Butler (1990) has argued, gender identity is not a stable truth but a performance embedded in power. In this case, the power to perform 'acceptable' masculinity is not equally distributed. Upper-caste men often have more room to engage with gender discourse without fear of social penalty, while others face intensified scrutiny.

FGDs also brought up the emotional exhaustion that many male activists felt when trying to challenge patriarchy within their own networks. A 29-year-old activist from a rural youth organisation explained:

"*Sometimes I feel like giving up. When you try to talk about gender, you're mocked, sidelined. You lose friendships. And it's hard to keep going when even your own side doesn't understand.*"

It bears resemblance to what Kavita Krishnan (2016) cautions is the result of male feminist activism, an activity which, without collective responsibility, can run the risk of swiftly utilising easily-achievable participation to merely pad accountability, or even perpetrate a burden on women who are already doing the heavy lifting in the name of gender justice. To become transformative, male allyship cannot be based on personal charisma or motivation but needs a transformation of social structures and cultures within movements.

An outstanding trend between field sites was the absence of the support mechanisms to men, who were struggling to unlearn patriarchal behaviours. There were few organisations that provided space of self-reflection or political education on masculinity. As another 25-year-old Delhi based NGO employee said:

"*We train men to speak about gender, but we don't train them to sit with their own privilege. It's always about action, not reflection.*"

This deficiency is sizeable. Allyship, without such guided reflections, is danger of turning it into a spectacle, a series of practiced inclinations instead of an actual shift in the individual formation of positionality. As Roy (2020) explains, in order to make a real change, one needs to address not only social systems but the entrenched patterns of power.

But in these issues there appeared emergence as well. Some of these activists spoke of having the kinds of realizations it is not theory that leads to, but being criticized by co-workers, or feeling uncomfortable in meetings, or being shouted at by women and queer members in the movement. According to one of the activists, such a scene is what can be characterized as embarrassing (and necessary), where the unlearning of masculinity is a disorganized process.

Conclusion: Reimagining Masculinity, Rethinking Allyship

This paper had aimed to discuss the relationship between male activists in North India experiencing the politics of gender and sexuality. The result was a sometimes mutually-inconsistent textured landscape of masculinities which are performed and policed as much as they are reimagined, sometimes warily and sometimes rebelliously. The testimonies of activists of different castes, classes, and ideologies demonstrate that allyship does not exist as an identity, but rather as a practice: a process that requires reflection, exposure, and constant examination by one of his or her place in the power structures.

On the one side of the spectrum are men who still exercise the language of progress, but only at the same time as they exercise patriarchal domination, what Connell (2005) would call hegemonic masculinity in the liberal garb. On the other extremes stand those who are trying to rebrand masculinity using responsibility, solidarity and intersectionality. These poles and the tension between them are between caring allyship and command allyship, and it operating through the majority of activist spaces, and even the work itself.

The findings also demonstrate that allyship is mediated by caste, class, and institutional access. Upper-caste male activists are more likely to enter feminist spaces with confidence, often without interrogating the histories of exclusion that make those spaces necessary in the first place. In contrast, male activists from Dalit and queer communities often face compounded resistance, not just for challenging patriarchy but for occupying public space in the first place. This reinforces the urgent need for intersectional frameworks that attend not just to gender, but to the layered hierarchies that shape how allyship is received and enacted.

If feminist and queer movements in India are to be genuinely transformative, they must not only invite male participation but also demand accountability from it. This means creating space for reflection, criticism, and unlearning. It means moving beyond inclusion as a goal, toward shared political labour rooted in justice. For men in activism, the task is not to lead the movement—but to walk alongside it, knowing when to speak, when to listen, and when to simply make room.

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