Modernity, ‘authenticity’, and ambivalence: subaltern masculinities on a South Indian college campus

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Focusing on an inner-city college in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, South India, the article investigates the sexual harassment of female students. Locating this violence within the context of social changes resulting from India’s integration into the global economy, the article argues that, in this context, sexual harassment is a manifestation of instrumental violence, deployed by subaltern or Scheduled Caste youths to contest their subordination within higher education and the ‘white-collar’ employment market. However, this contest reveals a number of ambivalences through which these subaltern masculinities are constituted. Rationalizing their sexual harassment, the protagonists’ narratives, therefore, oscillate between denigrating ‘Westernization’ while valorizing Tamil culture ideals, and vice versa. This conflict is centred on intense competition for male privilege and status between the newly emerged middle-class elite and impoverished low-caste groups, effectively reworking the social history of youth masculinity to meet the demands of new economic and political conditions.

The sexual harassment of female students by groups of young men, a practice referred to locally as ‘Eve teasing’, is a widely debated subject in Tamil society. The term ‘Eve teasing’ refers to a wide range of acts, from verbal taunting and bodily touching to physical assaults. To tackle this problem, the state administration has introduced a number of laws over the last decade, including the Prohibition of Eve Teasing Act (1998), which carries a maximum prison sentence of one year, and the Prohibition of Harassment of Women Act (2002), carrying sentences of three years for minor acts and a maximum sentence of ten years. In this article, I explore the issue of college-based sexual harassment from the perspective of students who commit these acts. Drawing on interviews and extensive fieldwork in one specific site, Nagaram College in Chennai, the Tamil state capital, I explore the narratives these youths construct to justify their ‘Eve teasing’, and the motivations that lie behind these assaults. In particular, I focus on the narratives of two students I came to know well in the course of my fieldwork, Kumaran and Shanker. Both students are from the fishing community and come from working-class backgrounds, living with their families in government-owned tenements. I focus on these particular narratives, because both youths have been involved in college-based sexual harassment, either as participants or as spectators.
The research site

Nagaram College intake consists of students from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds. Virtually all students are Hindu, and social class distinctions at the college mirror Hindu caste hierarchies: most middle-class students are from the politically dominant intermediate castes (referred throughout this article as ‘OBC’ [Other Backward Classes]) and working-class students are mainly Scheduled Caste (formally the so-called ‘untouchable’ castes, referred throughout this article as SC). Many of these impoverished SC students are the first generation in their families to have gained an education beyond high school, let alone an arts degree. As most SC families continue to marry females in their late teens, most, if not all, of the SC students at the college are young men. This group forms a large minority in the college. However, as higher education in India is still very much the preserve of the middle classes, the majority of the students at the college are from the OBC castes that have benefited from an English-medium education in privately run schools. Unlike the SC student body, this group consists of both young men and young women.

I locate the sexual harassment of female students within the context of campus inter-caste and class conflicts between these two opposing groups of male students. I explore how some SC students sexually harass middle-class OBC female students as an antagonistic ‘tactic’ to contest what they view as their marginal caste and socio-economic status within the higher education system. However, as we will see later, this tactic is self-defeating as it merely escalates inter-caste violence, rather than alleviating SC socio-economic subordination. SC students use this conflict as a basis to construct and perform hyper-masculinities, referring to themselves as ‘college rowdies’, a grandiose masquerade of power, valorizing physical strength and the musculature of the male body influenced by the motif of the anti-hero (‘rowdy’) in Tamil action films as well as American popular culture and imported Hong Kong martial arts films. Effectively, this hyper-masculine masquerade is a violent tactic seeking to reassert male privilege and status, and, as such, it is a reassertion of masculinity imagined as a struggle between men for power and dominance over women’s bodies and social spaces. The perpetrators view this struggle as a legitimate means of assuming male authority over the disruptive and negative forces in the world around them, particularly locally high levels of graduate unemployment and economic insecurity resulting from rapid economic change and India’s integration into the global market (cf. A. Campbell 1993: 1). Therefore, the purpose of this hyper-masculine masquerade, I argue, is to recover a loss of self-esteem, while conversely concealing weakness and social dependency (Majors & Mancini Billson 1992: 28; Segal 1997: 115). And, as such, SC hyper-masculinities should be seen as a source of anxiety as much as a structure of power and security (Majors & Mancini Billson 1992: 127).

Studies of what we can term male performance arenas – sites of male bravado, aggression, and competitiveness – have increasingly been subjected to anthropological investigation over the past decade or so. While I welcome this long overdue interest in elucidating the power dynamics of masculinity, a remaining problem is the continuing dearth of ethnography specifically focusing on research sites where masculinities are performed by men marginalized or subordinated within the wider society. Most current ethnographies of male performance arenas, in fact, continue to analyse masculinities merely in terms of the dominant narratives of male power, what gender theorist Robert Connell (1996) terms ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (see, e.g., Almeida 1996; Archetti 1999; Herzfeld 1992). Notable exceptions worth mentioning here are the works
of Robert Lancaster in Nicaragua (1992) and Julie Peteet’s work with men in Palestinian protest movements (2000). A supplementary aim of this article, then, is modestly to provide an additional contribution to the scant body of ethnography that seeks to understand the ways in which masculinities can equally be shaped by socio-economic marginalization and contestation.

Campus conflicts: the reworking of caste and class hierarchies

College sexual harassment (‘Eve teasing’) is actually committed off-campus: on buses to and from the college, at bus stops, and on the public footpaths leading to the college, typically taking the form of direct verbal sexual references or, in some cases, actual physical assaults. However, sometimes the perpetrators act individually, touching the body of a female student in a crowded bus.7 Students cite a range of causes for the attacks. SC students assert sexual harassment is retaliation for OBC bullying and intimidation, whereas OBC students argue the harassment is sexually motivated, that the SC students are attempting to embarrass the victim by raising questions concerning her sexual modesty within the wider community.8 Both perspectives have an element of truth. The bullying (what students refer to as ‘ragging’) of SC students is commonplace; however, some SC students also bully, intimidating rural SC students and students from indigenous tribal communities. Moreover, what some SC students claim is bullying is, in fact, retaliation by OBC youths for the sexual harassment of OBC women. When fights between SC and OBC students occur, it is often difficult to pinpoint the actual chain of events, whether the bullying occurred first or whether it is retaliation for sexual harassment. However, what is clear is that both the bullying of SC students and the sexual harassment of OBC females leads to a cycle of inter-group fighting between SC and OBC male students.

This inter-group animosity is reflected in the spatial demarcation of the campus in terms of caste statuses and gender, despite the fact that the internal spaces of the college are not officially regulated. This is in contrast to most other co-educational colleges in the city, which enforce a strict regime of campus gender segregation.9 As a government institution, Nagaram College only segregates classrooms and not the social spaces around the campus. Owing to this lack of official external regulation, students themselves appear to have formulated their own form of disciplinary power. Women only congregate at the front of the college, in their own single-gender groups or with OBC men, usually classmates, sitting on the roadside lawns, in full view of the public main road and the college authorities. Students consider the rear of the college off-limits to women; therefore, only men congregate here. Typically, in the case of OBC men, they play cricket on the green, while separately SC groups gamble under the trees. As a result of this spatial segregation, students are effectively differentiated into two broad antagonistic social blocs, a mixed group of middle-class OBC students studying in English and an opposing bloc of SC working-class males studying in Tamil.

Intense competition for white-collar employment and social status also marks conflicts between SC and OBC students. This competition is set against the backdrop of rapid economic and social changes commencing in 1992 with the ongoing process of economic liberalization and India’s subsequent integration into the global economy. As a result, the concurrent expansion of Chennai’s industrial and service sectors has created an environment of intense competition for accommodation and white-collar employment. For example, workers relocating to the city from both rural Tamil Nadu and other Indian cities (particularly English-speakers from the north) has led to a
doubling of the local population to over six million inhabitants in the last decade. Concurrent with this population expansion are high levels of graduate unemployment, further exasperated by a freeze on state administration jobs, historically the largest employer of SC graduates (Rajalakshmi 1999: 454). Increasingly, this competition is transforming caste and class antagonisms as different caste groups adapt social practices to meet the demands of economic transformation. The intermediate castes (OBC), for instance, which have historically arranged marriages between cross-cousins, increasingly prefer endogamous non-kin caste marriages based upon family wealth rather than kinship ties (Kapadia 1993: 26). Furthermore, as economic structures and employment patterns are transformed under the conditions of industrialization and urbanization, youths from SC communities also seeking to define themselves in terms of economic wealth and non-manual employment, rather than the caste-based occupations of their parents or grandparents (Busby 2000: 52; Osella & Osella 2000: 38; Ram 1991: 143). This emphasis on white-collar employment, therefore, places SC and OBC students in direct competition for social status as they are competing for the same pool of employers.

Directly benefiting from the expansion of the Tamil economy, the intermediate castes (OBC) are countering SC social mobility by remaking social hierarchies through the cultural capital of consumption choices, leisure, and tastes (Osella & Osella 1999: 434; cf. Bourdieu 1996; Rojek 2000: 128). As much of student life takes place off-campus, in other social arenas (the college is only open in the mornings) lifestyle consumption is an important aspect of student life. Follow students off-campus in the afternoons and you will be forgiven for thinking that the OBC students and SC exist in parallel universes. SC students roam the beaches and pack inside bulging buses on the way to the cinema to see a Tamil action film, while, in contrast, OBC students head to the air-conditioned shopping arcades to hang out in Starbucks-style coffee shops, or go to the multiplex cinema, often to see an American film. This process of social inclusion and exclusion is characterized by the aspirations to be seen as cosmopolitan and ‘modern’ (nagarikam), with the concurrent desire, as noted earlier, to move away from caste-based occupations towards employment in ‘white-collar’ jobs requiring comparatively high levels of education, especially in the English language (cf. Kapadia 1993: 48; 1995: 47). This puts SC students at a disadvantage, as most only speak Tamil, or if they speak English, it is spoken poorly, while in contrast, most OBC students have been educated at private English-medium schools. This concern with English is something of a ‘trickle-down’ effect from the cultural capital of the English-speaking Brahmin elite, many of whom have migrated to the English-speaking world with the emergence of Dravidian anti-Brahmin politics, and to this day, many Tamil Brahmins continue to educate their children at universities in Britain, and increasingly the United States.

Responding to these new markers of status, SC student seek to legitimize their sexual harassment of OBC females by characterizing English-medium students as ‘Westernized’ and, by implication, ‘immodest’ and deserving of harassment. This, of course, is a self-serving rationale: Nagaram College does not permit female students to wear so-called ‘Western’ clothing (though both SC and OBC male students dress in jeans and tee-shirts). This narrative of justification taps into deep-seated anxieties about the rapid pace of social change, often expressed in the public discourses of mainstream Tamil political parties, such as the DMK (Dravid Munnetra Kazhagam [Dravidian Progressive Party]). Searching for certainties in an environment of cultural flux (Appadurai 1996: 59), Tamil political leaders have reacted by promoting discourses...
that emphasize the protection of Tamil cultural ‘purity’ from encroachment by the English language, viewed in broader terms as an undifferentiated process of ‘Westernization’. The 2006 state assembly election illustrates the politics of this discourse. The DMK, for example, based its campaign on an anti-English-language stance. The new DMK-dominated government now offers tax-breaks for Tamil films in production that have a ‘pure’ Tamil title, rather than an English one. Moreover, Tamil newspapers are offering cash prizes to viewers who can spot the use of English in newly released films claiming to contain only ‘pure’ Tamil dialogue.11

OBC cultural capital and SC students’ feelings of marginality and inferiority
The increasing importance of the English language as the dominant marker of status in higher education and the ‘white-collar’ employment sector has entrenched feelings of marginalization and alienation among SC students at Nagaram College. The following interview with Kumaran and Shanker reveals that this marginalization has resulted in the internalization of an ‘inferiority complex’ based on strongly held views about SC social disadvantages. Kumaran starts the interview, discussing the differing social backgrounds of SC students and OBC students.

If you don’t have wealth, then you go to a corporation school and there won’t be enough coaching and discipline. Most corporation students live in government housing and slums. When a son comes back from school, the middle-class, high-caste parents will ask them what tests do you have tomorrow? What homework do you have? This only happens in middle-class homes. Only they will pay such attention. In our lower-class homes, the parents mainly focus on getting a daily wage. They will only think in terms of how they are going to eat tomorrow. Only if they are financially satisfied can they think about their children.

Bourdieu places social competences and socially legitimate forms of knowledge at the centre of the social production and reproduction of cultural capital. It is these competences that form the embodied habitus of social status that stratify a particular social field through a struggle for domination and subordination between competing social agents (Bourdieu 2003; Jenkins 2002: 85). In Kumaran’s narrative, he makes this link between economic class and cultural capital by drawing our attention to what he perceives to be the social advantages of the OBC middle classes and the disadvantages of poor SC students. It is not just that his parents are poor and focused on providing income for the family’s survival, but, rather, the middle-class OBC families are able to give their children a head start by taking a direct interest in their homework and by coaching them for exams. This type of parental coaching is virtually impossible for most SC students to obtain, as their parents have not been educated beyond primary or secondary schooling.

As Kumaran starts to draw our attention to the benefits that these OBC students have obtained from their private schools, particularly in terms of expertise and academic discipline, we begin to see how these factors structure and stratify this social field. Important here is the expansion of private English-medium education in the city over the last decade. Most of the middle-class students at Nagaram College live in the southern suburbs of Chennai, where I lived. In these suburbs, private English-medium schools appear to be on the corner of every street. In fact, they are perceived as such a threat to the Tamil language that, at the time of my fieldwork, the state government was considering passing a law to make the teaching of Tamil in these schools compulsory. There is an irony here: many of the students attending these schools are not from the
traditional English-language-speaking elite, but, rather, from the very backward castes
that have benefited from the consolidation of non-Brahmin economic and political
power, and reservation quotas for education and government employment. Many OBC
civil servants who have gained a stable income through government employment
quotas, with an eye to the family’s continual social mobility, send their children to these
private matriculation schools.

Later on in the interview, it became clear how this contest over the cultural capital of
the English language was played out through the prism of caste differences. Kumaran’s
comments on OBC women students (below) draws out the anxieties expressed to me
by several SC students regarding their future marriage prospects. And this is the
paradox of the OBC middle-class discourse of modernity, as marriage principles are
still based on caste endogamy – the shift is away from cross-cousin marriage to a
marriage based on economic status within castes – SC men are excluded from this
prospect of social mobility, until a large number of SC women become educated. So, on
the one hand, SC students feel too educated to marry a girl from their own community,
on the other, because of caste endogamy and the lack of cultural capital, they know it
will be hard to find an educated wife from within the college. On this Kumaran notes:

Most of the girls from low-caste families won’t go to college. It is middle-class and forward caste girls
who are at our college. These girls have matriculation schooling (English-medium). If a girl has a
matriculation education, then she will make friends with boys who also have a matriculation educa-
tion. But low-caste boys who reach college level will not have the opportunity to marry these girls, as
the girls’ families will arrange marriages for them. You can say that low-caste, Tamil-medium male
students cannot not tolerate this; they will have an inferiority complex about it. Rarely are English-
medium students having friendships with us.

While Kumaran was speaking about the anxieties he felt about his relationship with
English-medium students, Shanker cut into the conversation and spoke at length about
these differences and his feelings of inferiority:

I study mostly in Tamil because that is our regional language. Our morals, behaviour and mentality
are different to the English-speaking society. Those who speak English will have a different lifestyle.
Because they like to explore different ideas, the knowledge and attitudes of such people is always
higher: due to this Tamil-medium students at the college feel inferior.

Why do you feel inferior?

They are richer than we are. Only people with money can afford an English-language education.
Those schools are very expensive. The government run the Tamil-medium schools, so they are free.
Those that come from the Tamil-medium schools try to learn English at college, but they only speak
half-English. No one teaches us grammar rules. We can recognize some English in books, but we will
not have the confidence to speak English in front of the class. So the interaction between boys and girls
will only be between students who can speak English. Therefore, the English-speaking society will be
distant to us. The English-speaking students are very close; they will always be interacting with girls.

Now, the caste barrier is mainly based on economic background. Generally, the person who is of
the higher caste has a higher financial position. Therefore, he will allow his son to go for an English-
medium education. The person who gets the higher education will always get the higher posting in a
company like a MNC [multi-national company]. And in such companies, it is an environment where
they only speak English. You have to pass an English aptitude test before they will give you a job.
Therefore, when these people speak English, they will marry someone who speaks English.

Why do you have these feelings about the English-speaking community, when it is the Tamil Dravidian
parties that have the political power?
Well, originally the problem was not between English culture and us, but between Dravidian culture [South Indian culture] and the Aryan culture. Aryan culture is mainly Brahmins; they earned their money by telling us that they were representatives of God. They always had much pride, thinking they are superior to us. Actually, the simple distinction is between non-Brahmins and Brahmins. The Dravidians are known for their courage and hard work. Therefore, there was a clash between these two communities, because the Brahmins feel that they are superior, as they do hygienic work in the temple.

However, this could not last. Due to financial reasons, the Brahmins could not keep their high stance. Nowadays, people are valued by their earning potential. Nevertheless, the Dravidian parties are saying: ‘we are Tamilians, we feel proud of this’. But this talk has no value now. How can we get pride just from our language? If you go to Karnataka, they will say: ‘we are proud because we speak Kannada’, in Kerala, they will say: ‘we are proud because we speak Malayalam’. This happens in every state. It does not give us pride. A Tamilian, like every other Indian, is also an Indian. When you go for a job at an MNC, you will find all kinds of people; some will come from Kashmir, many are coming from Bangalore. So they will recruit from all over India. In such a situation, you have to speak English.

[Kumaran interrupts:] The state government says we should expand the Tamil language. But if you know only Tamil, you can go nowhere. If you go out of Tamil Nadu, then you are empty; you are like a newly born baby. If I went to Andhra [Pradesh], I would be expected to speak in English; or at least in another Indian language like Hindi. Even here, if you go to a company, they will expect you to speak English. At RPG Cellular or SKYCELL [Indian mobile phone network providers] they will not speak Tamil. If you struggle to speak English, they will say: shut up and go away. They will not respect you.

What does Kumaran and Shanker’s narrative tell us about the sentiments that underpin the contest between SC and OBC students? Certainly, there appears to be a conflict between the aspiration for the cultural capital of OBC students, and what they view as a unique Tamil cultural perspective. They talk about English-language speakers as being different to them in terms of morals, social behaviour, ‘mentality’, and ‘lifestyles’. But while they essentialize Tamils as being ‘hardworking’ and having ‘courage’, later they draw attention to what they view as the futility of an identity politics based on language, by highlighting the practical disadvantages that this brings them in terms of graduate employment. This is a realization that the caste oppression under Brahmin domination has been replaced by the economic oppression of a new non-Brahmin elite.

However, perhaps, the most important aspect of Kumaran and Shanker’s narrative is the internalization of subordination and shame. OBC students are taken as being superior to them; they view themselves as being social incompetent and incomplete. Kumaran spoke about speaking ‘half-English’, of being like ‘newly born babies’, without the social skills to compete equally in the employment market. This sense of shame is articulated through the fear of being told ‘to go away’ by employers, of not receiving social respect in the classroom by OBC students. In this sense, I suggest, the ‘inferiority’ they feel when they see English-medium students happily interacting across the genders is not so much about marriage, as they say in the interview. More likely, these interactions draw attention to their own sense of shame and social marginalization because they are unable to mix with OBC women themselves. As a defence mechanism, they characterize this unobtainable social capital as belonging to a decadent ‘Western-ized’ elite without the ‘morals’ and ‘courage’ of Tamil ideals.

‘Eve teasing’ and SC narratives of hyper-masculinity: being a ‘college rowdy’

Resisting marginalization within the college environment, many SC students like Kumaran and Shanker seek to build status among cohorts by constructing grandiose hyper-masculine identities, which they consider as the ‘authentic’ markers of men’s
status in Tamil society. Taking their cues from the ideal of the anti-hero in Tamil film
(‘rowdies’), these youths refer to themselves as ‘college rowdies’, a ‘masquerade’ or
performance of masculinities that aims to break down rigid hierarchies by using
violence to contest the dominant powers within society (see Holmlund 1993: 214; Segal
1997: 188). As with the ‘rowdy’ characters in Tamil film, the performance of ‘college
rowdiness’ is enacted around ideas concerning sexuality, physical strength, and ‘deviant’
forms of leisure. Linked to these notions of male physical strength, ‘college rowdies’ also
show a concern with being ‘hot’, expressed through smoking, drinking, and sexual
activities, which refers to the dynamic interplay between kunam (substances) and
kuman (action) that is central to Tamil personhood, a process where the individual
seeks to induce ‘heat’ or achieve ‘coolness’, effected through the types of food eaten,
sexual intercourse, and foods transacted between different caste groups (Daniel 1984:
183, 189; McGilvray 2003: 23).
Concerns about the muscularity of the male body and the ability to use physical
violence are also an important part of being a ‘rowdy’. This is not just for purposes of
intimidation, but, more importantly, as a means of self-defence against other students
whom they are in competition with for status. To that end, all the ‘college rowdies’ I met
at Nagaram College were obsessive users of the gym, attending twice a day for body-
building exercises, and using dietary supplements or steroids to bulk up their muscles.
As a performance, this concern with strength is similar to the ‘cool pose’ of the youths
described in Majors and Mancini Billson’s (1992) study of Afro-American masculini-
ties, where black men use postures of aloofness and fearlessness as defence against
racism and poverty. On this they note:

As a performance, cool pose is designed to render the black man visible and to empower him; it eases
the pain of blocked opportunities. Being cool shows both the dominant culture and the black man
himself that he is strong and proud. He is somebody. He is a survivor ... in spite of centuries of

In the context of Kerala, which neighbours Tamil Nadu, Osella and Osella (1998)
suggest that such a form of ‘masquerade’ is possible as youth is a period in an Indian
man’s lifecycle when he is relatively unencumbered by the caste restrictions that nor-
manally structure the interactions between adult men. Therefore, they note, in this period
young men are able to escape these restrictions by sharing clothes and music cassettes
with their cohorts, in addition, indulging in other aspects of college culture (‘cinema
culture’ in their account) such as ‘tuning’ (flirting with girls), bunking off college to go
the movies and having ‘romances’ with female peers (1998: 191). While most youths
participate in these activities in Chennai, I suggest that the ‘college rowdy’ is a particular
character that emerges from within this youth culture as a form of resistance. While
caste purity may be less pronounced in the period of youth, the social field at Nagaram
College is far from egalitarian; as I have already argued, it is structured through the
production of cultural capital, in particular the English language and other forms of
social marginalization.
Central to ‘college rowdies’ performance of hyper-masculinity is the sexual harass-
ment of OBC female students. Effectively, this targeting of women is a displacement of
aggression and rage onto someone else, viewed as vulnerable, as, according to Tamil
cultural traditions, women are the boundary markers of group identities and ritual
purity. However, it is important to view this ‘tactic’ more broadly, in terms of the
staging of conflict between antagonistic groups of men and the affirmation of men's status within a particular social field, namely the college campus. In this sense, the sexual harassment of OBC female students by SC youths and the retaliatory violence of OBC youths, are instrumental transactions deployed to establish male hierarchies by humiliating or devaluing the 'reputation' and status of other men. This violence and anger and counter-violence, therefore, is not about catharsis per se; rather, it is the readdressing of social standing, played out as a zero-sum game between men (A. Campbell 1993: 56). The following interview extracts provide an insight into how these violent transactions manifest. Kumaran begins his interview by talking about his college life and the anxieties he felt before he attended college:

When I went to college for the first time, as a student from a poor family, I expected to be bullied. But my advantage was that I live locally, just down the road. The college is in my neighbourhood. So I was lucky, no one bullied me because of my local reputation (nalla peru). For that, I got some respect (mariyathai) at college. They would have thought, oh, he is a local youth; if we bully him it could be a serious problem for us. I also got a good reputation in my undergraduate department, because of that, when I applied for postgraduate studies I was accepted. But outside the department, I have had a lot of problems. When I was a first-year undergraduate, I beat up a postgraduate student who was calling me names. Because of that, I got a reputation. Now everyone knows who Kumuran is. The fight was going to become a police case, he filed a charge; but I went to the police station and they compromised smoothly. So far, I do not have any more police cases, even though, when I was an undergraduate, I caused many problems. Once I reached my postgraduate studies, everyone started giving me proper respect.

**What did the postgraduate student say to you to make you want to fight with him?**

I was walking alone the road outside the college and he started to scold me. I told him to act decently, but he carried on. So I went and got some friends from my neighbourhood [a Scheduled Caste tenement]. But I could only get two friends and when I returned, he had gathered a big crowd. We started to fight and the police were called. We were arrested, but the students' union came to the police station and got us released, because I had a big name. The police filed a case, but after two months, the students' union managed to get the case dropped. I didn’t have any problems with that student before. He had a problem with me because my friend had 'Eve teased' his girlfriend. He had kept this in mind and while I was roaming, he started to call me names. So I got angry, I have a short temper. I was born like that. He was from the 29A bus route [the bus route from the middle-class suburbs of southern Chennai, where most OBC students live]. He had hundreds of people on his side, so he had a strong case against me.

**Tell me more about bullying and 'Eve teasing'...**

If there is a problem in this college, it is because of girls. When it is all boys at the college, then there will be no problems. Usually, if the problem is just between boys, they will make a compromise. When it comes to co-ed colleges, the problems are projected upon the girls. If a boy is 'Eve teasing' a girl from another community, he will become very popular with the boys from his own community. However, the girl's community will want to fight.

**But why are students ‘Eve teasing’ these college girls?**

It is because boys cannot tease each other. If a girl does not have a boyfriend, no boy will respect her, the way he would respect another boy. This is common everywhere. If my friend Shanker 'Eve teases' a girl, he is doing it for fun. But suppose she goes home and tells her brothers. They will come here and beat Shanker; this is normal here, no one can change that. When Shanker 'Eve teases' that girl, his friends will enjoy it.

**How will students ‘Eve tease’? What acts will they do?**

Usually they are calling the girl a bad name. If we see her walking with a boy, we will ask him if she is a 'case' [student slang for sex worker]. Students will only touch a girl if he has been drinking. If you ask them 'why did you "Eve tease" that girl?' they will say that they were drunk. But this is not the real reason. Actually, they always wanted to touch the girl and they went to get a drink first, so they had the
courage to do it. After a few drinks, he will lift the girl’s clothes and put his hands on her body. As for boys calling the girls names, this will not cause much of a problem. When gangs of boys fight, touching the girl’s body is the cause.

Very often, when I interviewed students about sensitive issues such as sexual practices and ‘Eve teasing’, they spoke in the third person. They would describe incidents with clarity, but would attribute the sexual harassment to someone else. One of the reasons I had chosen to interview Kumaran was that other students told me that he had been involved in ‘Eve teasing’. Reading his interview back seems to confirm this. Other students told me that the police arrest he refers to was due to a fight following his ‘Eve teasing’ of an OBC female student. Therefore, he was certainly talking about himself when he was referring to his friend’s ‘Eve teasing’ behaviour. I suspect his reticence is due to the fact that ‘Eve teasing’ is illegal and, understandably, a politically sensitive issue.12

Obviously, Kumaran puts a positive spin on his narrative. He turns a negative event, the possibility of being bullied at college because of his caste status, into a self-affirming narrative in which he is admired for his ability to use violence and keep his self-respect. He talks of his reputation as a fighter, someone who is to be feared: who will explode with little provocation. Naturalizing his anger, he asserts he was born that way. We find similar sentiments in Phillippe Bourgois’s (2003 [1996]) ethnography of social marginalization among Puerto Rican gangs in East Harlem. Here young men rationalized their social ‘powerlessness’ by redefining their masculine dignity around ‘promiscuity and conspicuous violence’ (2003 [1996]: 288). Discussing one of his informants, Bourgois notes: ‘Unable to reproduce the patriarchal aspirations of his grandfather’s generation within the context of a repressive nuclear family and an extended kin-based community, he concentrated his male energies into macho one-upmanship. He worked hard at exaggerating his sexual promiscuity and hardheartedness’ (2003 [1996]: 289).

Kumaran’s use of ‘Eve teasing’ as a means to create status among his friends is hardly surprising. Men who are structurally subordinated within society often claim superiority within their own social milieu by locating their self-esteem upon their own bodies (Alexander 2000: 235; Prieur 1998: 231). More interesting is the way these masculinities are constructed and performed using women’s bodies, both as a group boundary marker, and as a sign of men’s weakness: the inability adequately to ‘protect’ the women of their own ‘community’ from being assaulted (Siddharta 2001: 228). Effectively, the perpetrator temporarily compensates for any feelings of weakness by calling into question the masculinities of the targeted group, thus highlighting the loss of male control over what is being publicly revealed (Basu 2000: 265; Sennett 2004: 117).13

This would seem to suggest that this form of sexual harassment is a collective performance which is enacted for the benefit of an audience comprising men from both the perpetrators’ and victim’s communities. It is therefore enacted in public spaces with the purpose of demonstrating the weakness of a targeted community. It demonstrates the perpetrators’ power to regulate social spaces, and, in the case of SC youths, the power to contest another group’s spatial control, effectively levelling the social superiority of the victim and the victim’s caste and/or caste group (cf. Sunder Rajan 1999: 345). Illustrative of this point is the fact that most reported cases of ‘Eve teasing’ in the local newspapers have occurred in urban public spaces not clearly defined or spatially differentiated in terms of local social hierarchies, such as cinema complexes and shopping arcades. However, this is not to say that ‘Eve teasing’ does not occur on an
individual basis. For example, while conducting fieldwork, students reported to me examples of sexual harassment that had occurred as the result of female students spurning the advances of male students or because they had ridiculed the men’s attempt at befriending them. Conversely, an SC student told me that when he had tried to befriend an OBC female student on whom he had a crush, her OBC male friends, in his opinion, had unjustly accused him of sexual harassment. However, a point worthy remembering here is that retaliatory violence enacted by men from the harassed women’s community more often than not communalizes the initial act of individual-ized sexual harassment.

The objectification of women’s bodies as boundary markers of group identity is a potent symbol of college inter-caste conflicts because it draws on mainstream ideas about men’s social role as regulators and protectors of family honour (Kannabiran 2005: 5). Underpinning these ideas is the socialization of girls within the family in terms of their future potential as ‘good’ marriage prospects – often signified in terms of caste ‘purity’ and virginity – and the socialization of boys with a view to being future heads of household and successful family ‘breadwinners’ (Sodhi & Manish 2003: 118). Girls, therefore, are effectively assessed as marriage prospects in terms of their sexual modesty and virtue, whereas boys are encouraged to become gatekeepers of their wives’, sisters’, or daughters’ physical and moral well-being. It is generally accepted, therefore, that men have the right to control the movements and behaviour of wives and daughters, and sons can legitimately exercise this authority over their sisters outside the family home (Bandyopadhyay & Khan 2003: 64).

As a consequence, female reputations are intrinsically linked to family honour, and it is seen as men’s role to protect this honour at all cost (Nagel 1998: 254; Niranjana 2001: 48-55; Sodhi & Manish 2003: 124). These were sentiments articulated by every male youth I interviewed, including rebellious ‘college rowdies’, who expressed the aspiration to marry a virgin and to become a householder and family ‘breadwinner’. Moreover, the ‘loss of honour’ has a devastating affect upon the victims of sexual harassment: the subsequent suicide or attempted suicide of sexual harassment victims is occasionally reported in the Tamil media.

It is no surprise, then, that ‘college rowdies’ seeking to justify their sexual harassment utilize commonly held codes of female morality to legitimize their actions, as the following extracts from an interview with Kumaran illustrate.

The main problem is that the girls are showing off. It is their age. If someone teases her, then she should not make it a big issue, she should tolerate it. It is because of her behaviour that this problem has arisen. You can decide a girl’s character by her clothing and her karpus (modesty).

Because foreign culture is entering inside Tamil culture, our culture is gradually changing. Culture-wise Dravidian culture is the best. Tamil culture has always been in a high state. This Tamil culture cannot be erased. One man, one wife (oruvanthu oruthi) is the greatest plus point for Tamil culture. We are living in one family until death. Previously, our girls were wearing saris, now they are wearing shirts, pants, and jeans. Before they were inside the house, now they ride scooters, and drive cars. Women can do all of this; they are even joining the national army. This change is good. But at the same time, it should not change our culture. This is one reason for ‘Eve teasing’. Wearing clothes that are equal to us [men] is not proper. If I go down to the beach, I see shorts and tee-shirts. This is what they are wearing. This makes us do the ‘Eve teasing’.

Kumaran seeks to justify his sexual harassment of OBC women drawing on Tamil ideals concerning marriage fidelity – oruvanthu oruthi (one man, one wife) – and

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notions of female chastity or karppu. The latter ideal, karppu, was a constant point of reference in my interviews with other Tamil youths and a regular subject of discussion. The subject of karppu often arose, for instance, in relation to an American film on cable television that a youth had recently seen. Usually, the discussion would take the form of a cultural comparison between Tamil culture and ‘English culture’ or a critical discussion of the public display of kissing or female swimming attire shown in American films, which most informants viewed as being counter to Tamil cultural ideals. As an embodied disposition, karppu is a nexus of interrelated ideas that act as a bulwark for caste endogamy, seeking to define the interactions between men and women. Trawick (1990) characterises karppu as a form of female sexual power, which a woman may lose through infidelity, or even if another man merely looks at her with desire. She notes that ‘[t]hrough chastity and mental steadfastness, a women’s [karppu] is maintained. [However,] unlike semen, [karppu] is not a bodily substance, but rather a moral condition’ (1990: 278). As a practice, karppu effectively legitimizes the use of the female body as the site where group boundaries are discursively marked out, and, as such, where caste antagonisms between men are physically played out (Pandian 1987: 49-50).

Kumaran’s reference to female chastity and fidelity is, of course, disingenuous and highly cynical. After all, ‘college rowdies’ themselves construct their identities by subverting Tamil sexual mores. All the ‘rowdies’ I worked with, for instance, admitted to frequenting sex workers and claimed to be sexually promiscuous. Ironically, however, OBC youths stigmatized ‘college rowdies’ because of their professed promiscuity; ‘they only go with ‘slum girls’ was a slur often reiterated to me by OBC students. In fact, ‘college rowdies’ are fully aware of their double standards. Another ‘rowdy’, Prabhu, put this apparent pragmatism in perspective for me. Explaining his moral inconsistency towards female students, he noted that he had ‘two personalities, one for the home and another for college life’. At home in front of his parents, he had to appear meek and studious; however, if his college cohorts were to take him seriously, he had to be seen as being rebellious and nonchalant.

It would seem, then, from Prabhu’s comments that ‘rowdy’ identities constantly oscillate between two opposing moral registers. Family life is organized around notions of respectability. It is about being a hard-working student and about getting a good job and thus becoming a good marriage prospect, whereas, in contrast, college life is more about maintaining personal reputations, for example being a good fighter. Reputation, in fact, was a word often used by Kumaran; if we recall his earlier interview, he noted that bullying ceased when he obtained a ‘good reputation’ at college. The constant shifting between opposing moral registers is also apparent in Kumaran’s interview at the start of this section. Here, he stigmatizes women for wearing tee-shirts and shorts on the beach. He considers that this demonstrates women’s lack of modesty and chastity, though in reality this is a somewhat disingenuous statement. The only women who congregate on the beach near to the college are sex workers, and they dress in saris. This apparent lack of modesty is juxtaposed to his own cultural ‘authenticity’ and then blamed on the encroachment of foreign media. Yet ‘rowdies’ themselves invert Tamil cultural ideals when constructing their own masculinities, inverting Tamil notions of caste ‘impurity’, as noted earlier, usually denoted in terms of bodily heat, to construct dissident identities based on the consumption of ‘hot’ substances, such as alcohol, and by participating in leisure activities normally deemed ‘hot’, such as body-building. This ambivalent attitude towards notions of respectability, perhaps, contains
an underlying truth. It is the realization that SC students are as much regulated and marginalized by the elite’s notions of respectability as women are.

**Conclusion: the remaking of masculinities**

Missing from my account of college sexual harassment are the views of the abused women. This anomaly is partially due to my primary focus on men-only arenas, but equally it is also due to the inappropriateness, as I see it, of an older foreign man asking young female students to revisit painful events. To redress this imbalance, I conducted an extensive literature search to find studies focusing on women’s responses to gender violence. Sadly, this search produced only two published studies (cf. Anandhi & Jeyaranjan 2001; Go, Johnson, Bentley, Sivaram & Srikrishnam 2003) conducted in Tamil Nadu. However, beneficially, the research samples used in these studies were large, and, interestingly, many of the surveyed women reported being victims of gender violence. It is important to note that these studies do not specifically investigate college arenas, but rather they focus on working-class/low-caste domestic spheres. Nevertheless, because they foreground many issues explored in this article, it is worth discussing them. Comparative with my analysis, both studies, for instance, connect gender violence with socio-economic subordination and inter-caste conflicts (Anandhi & Jeyaranjan 2001: 25; Go et al. 2003: 394). And one of the studies situates gender violence within the context of socio-economic change and working-class women’s increasing participation in the labour market, specifically in garment and leather production (Anandhi & Jeyaranjan 2001). In contrast to this welcomed economic development, the study also highlights locally high levels of male unemployment, which, the authors argue, makes women rather than men the sole ‘breadwinner’ in many working-class homes (Anandhi & Jeyaranjan 2001: 26). The study argues that this change in women’s economic power is central to the reported increase in gender violence. As men’s ‘breadwinner’ status is the foundation of their power within the family, the study suggests that men’s violence is a reaction to the devaluing of their social status.

This conclusion concurs with a growing body of feminist literature emerging within the sub-continent, which, like my study, locates gender violence within the context of social transformation (usually characterized in these accounts as globalization). However, as the aforementioned studies focus on spousal abuse, this gender violence manifests somewhat differently than the sexual harassment described in this article. Confined to the privacy of the home, it is about the reassertion of male power in the domestic sphere rather than a means to contest or assert social hierarchies in the public sphere, as is the case with ‘Eve teasing’, even though notions of male honour in Tamil society are equally defined in terms of men’s control of both the domestic and public spheres.

One aspect of the literature I disagree with, however, is the understandable tendency to conceptualize men’s reactions to rapid social changes in terms of a ‘crisis of masculinity’ (see, e.g., Kannabiran 2005; Kannabiran & Kannabiran 2002). In my opinion, this ‘crisis of masculinity’ argument needs unpacking, particularly as it implies that men’s identities have unitary and stable properties, rather than being multiple and historically contingent. In my opinion, this viewpoint suggests that a ‘crisis of masculinity’ results from men’s innate inability to moderate or change their violent behaviour. Such a viewpoint seems to undermine the very notion that gender is socially constructed. Equally, men could deploy the ‘crisis’ argument to essentialize their violence and to legitimize gendered hierarchies (MacInness 1998). Rather than viewing men’s
responses to social change as a ‘crisis’, I suggest, it is more productive to conceptualize these reactions as being merely a reconfiguration of men’s dominant position in society. This reconfiguration is not a ‘crisis of masculinity’ as such, but rather, I suggest, the men involved in gender conflicts actively adapt or remake dominant forms of masculinity – using violence if they deem it necessary – to meet the demands of new economic and political conditions. In this sense, then, this is a strategic consolidation of men’s social power and not a ‘crisis’ as such.

The conflicts between opposing groups of male students at Nagaram College, therefore, are effectively social events. They are instrumental competitions, perceived as struggles between men for the ‘right’ to dominate and control both social spaces and women’s bodies (A. Campbell 1993: 55). In this sense, both SC and OBC male student groups, who are involved in these inter-group conflicts, are acting in accordance with the same model of mainstream masculinity, a model of masculinity based on the reassertion of men’s social power perceived purely in terms of difference and domination. While women disproportionately bear the brunt of the violence, they are effectively treated by male students as pawns to be transacted between men in a competition to determine who dominates and regulates campus social life; a strategy deployed by OBC men as a means of drawing boundaries with the purpose of socially excluding SC youths (Connell 1996: 83). We have seen this strategy enacted by OBC male students, who regulate campus spaces both by bullying (‘ragging’) SC youths and by violently punishing SC youths who either make friendly contacts with OBC women or sexually harass them. Conversely, SC students seek to contest OBC domination through their sexual harassment, as we have seen here, using masquerades of hyper-masculinity to build status among cohorts.

However, this SC tactic is self-defeating; in reality, their violence merely exasperates their own social marginalization. After all, the authorities can easily punish them, for example by excluding SC students from education or, even worse, by prosecuting them in the criminal courts. Testament to this failed tactic is the day-to-day reality of most SC students’ lives. Most continue to live in poverty and remain socially subordinated. Moreover, many educated SC youths continue to face an insecure future of under-employment or, even worse, constant unemployment. To alleviate a sense of inferiority and social shame, ‘college rowdies’ attempt to transcend the immanence of these anxieties by projecting their anger onto others using gender violence. This criminal behaviour therefore is just one of the ways that youths address the world of men as a display of masculinities in terms of difference and dominance in relation to other men-centred arenas, and in relation to their neighbourhoods and women (B. Campbell 1999: 186–7).

NOTES

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1 ‘Eve teasing’ is discussed extensively in the Tamil media, particularly, in the local newspapers. It is also a much discussed subject on Tamil internet websites. At the time of writing, a Google search of the combination ‘Eve teasing’ and ‘Chennai’ produced 45,600 different listings.
Run an eighteen-month period, I found that they enjoyed the kudos associated with English film titles, such as films. I suspect that these disturbances were politically organized. Working with Tamil film fan clubs over a response to disgruntled audiences who have been defacing film posters with English titles and disrupting English, rather than the dubbed Tamil versions, despite being unable to speak the language.

Sports brands (such as Nike and Adidas). Moreover, many fans prefer to view American actions films in

sense, 'Westernization' is an empty, floating signifier. That is, Kumaran is merely appropriating the term to

are confident; because they 'resisted their charms' or who are highly educated, especially in English. In this

used the term 'Westernization' in such instances merely to refer to girls who appear threatening because they

have to wear 'traditional' dress on campus and mostly likely at home as well. I found that Tamil youths often

South Indian films are easily categorized in term of language, as the southern states are demarcated according

mediated through the kidnap and subsequent recovery of female children or wives. For example, at the time

of my fieldwork, this theme was a subtext in the Tamil action films

strategies of interviewees with violent pasts, see Robben & Robben (1996).

This is a common theme in Tamil films: the 'rowdy' is portrayed locked in contest with other men,

mediated through the kidnap and subsequent recovery of female children or wives. For example, at the time

of my fieldwork, this theme was a subtext in the Tamil action films Run (1991) and Youth (1991), as well as
countless other films.

Tamil youths categorize films in terms of language rather than the actual nationality of a film. Thus,

British, American, or Australian films are all called 'English films'. Understandably, this is because regional

South Indian films are easily categorized in term of language, as the southern states are demarcated according
to local vernaculars.

When Kumaran refers to college girls 'Westernization', this is obviously disingenuous, as female students

have to wear 'traditional' dress on campus and mostly likely at home as well. I found that Tamil youths often

used the term 'Westernization' in such instances merely to refer to girls who appear threatening because they
are confident; because they 'resisted their charms' or who are highly educated, especially in English. In this
sense, 'Westernization' is an empty, floating signifier. That is, Kumaran is merely appropriating the term to
rationalize and justify his poor behaviour towards women. As previously noted, I have never seen a women
on the beach dressed in the way he describes. Moreover, I strongly suspect he would be too scared to sexually
harass 'a real Westernized' woman, as such a women would be so well connected that the consequences would
be terrible for him.

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