

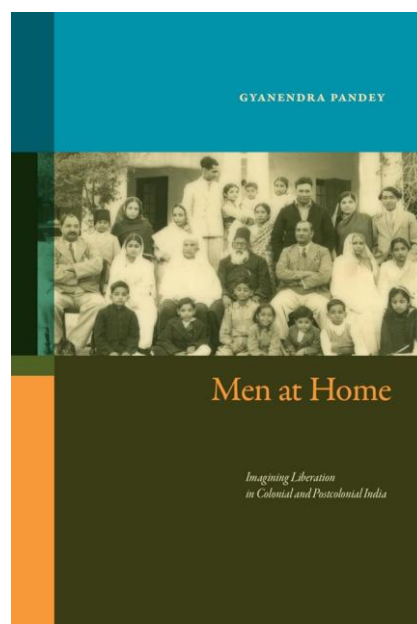
<https://doingsociology.org/2025/06/18/men-at-home-imagining-liberation-in-colonial-and-postcolonial-india-by-gyanendra-pandey-2025-a-review-by-atul-upadhyay/#:~:text=The%20central%20theme%20that%20the,nation%2Dstate%20post%2Dindependence.>

BOOK REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India by Gyanendra Pandey (2025): A Review by Atul Upadhyay



JUN 18, 2025 domestic, gender, home, masculinity, men



In the January-June (2018) issue of the Hindi journal *Pratiman*, published by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Gyanendra Pandey wrote an article titled 'Hindustani Aadmi Ghar Mein (Indian Men at Home)'. In that article, Pandey, who is also one of the founders and strong pillars of the much-acclaimed Indian contribution to the discipline of History at the global level: the Subaltern Studies Collective, tried to address a completely new theme, if one considers his early works (even though his interest in the subject is not new as mentioned in his new book). Although in the broader context of the recent shifts in social sciences, a prominent historian's picking of a new theme like masculinity or the lives of men is not surprising.

In the article published in 2018, Pandey analyses three marriages, all of them are men and prominent public figures, namely Rahul Sankrityayan, Munshi Premchand, and Rajendra Prasad. Since I intend to discuss something else, I will drop the discussion about Pandey's 2018 article after mentioning the basic premise for discussing the main subject. Pandey's analysis of these marriages hovers around the following questions: How do progressive and prominent men behave in domestic spaces? What kind of considerations are necessary to understand the inherent gender dynamics in the domestic space? What has changed in the behaviour of men in domestic spaces, like the home, in recent times? These are the questions situated at the intersection of manliness, gender relations, and domestic spaces. Pandey deals with them elegantly, sensitively, and carefully in his new book, an appendage to the questions posed in the 2018 article. The archive used in the book is mostly autobiographies by the very same persons and their partners or spouses, who are also the subjects of the whole discussion. The title of the book is *Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, published in 2025 by Duke University Press. This book is the one that I am going to discuss in this review.

As Pandey himself mentions, this new "book is an essay on men's existence in the South Asian domestic world" (p. 1). In the domestic sphere of the world, men explore the notion of liberation in very different ways, often 'self-contradictory' to how they understand the same thing in the outside world. The central theme that the book deals with is: the behaviour of men in the domestic world and how it can often contradict their ideals that they believe in the outside world. These ideals are about national liberation from the colonial occupation and the making of a better nation-state post-independence. In the 2018 article, Pandey discussed only three people, all of whom are prominent public figures and progressive in their ideas, who are from upper-caste, elite households. To make the discourse more wholesome and to take into account the most crucial and basic nature of the Indian society (i.e. caste and economic disparity), Pandey includes some more, around one and a half dozen people (again, all prominent people with a sizeable amount of public life) in total, belonging to different castes, socio-economic locations, and regions. Although the book is more centred on the Hindi-speaking North India. The connecting thread in all the cases, in the words of Pandey, is "husbandness". By 'husbandness', He means that men are generally "not reduced to one aspect of their beings contrary to the experience of women" (p. 6), whose whole lives are surrounded by the omnipresent structure of the home. The author claims the book to be "a history of ordinary life among ordinary people" narrated from "the location of domestic space" (p. 8).

The book is divided into three parts, and the parts are further bisected into seven chapters, other than these seven chapters, there is a prelude and an epilogue. In the first part titled 'Legacies', there are two chapters which provide us with a background in which Indian men explored their 'selves', and a history of their childhood, especially of the houses in which they lived in different periods of their lives. The questions of modernity, independence, the struggle against colonial oppression, and the contradiction between tradition and modernity, in terms of social and domestic morals and values, are the major themes of these two chapters.

The second part, titled 'Practices', deals with the questions of 'Duty', 'Discipline', and 'Dignity' presented in chapter format. The question of Duty holds a crucial place in the protagonists of Pandey; it was a central responsibility of the protagonists to liberate India from the shackles of colonial subjugation, and to fulfil it, all his protagonists were "*most at home* away from home" and were "occupied in the task of intellectual, political, and national advancement" (p. 82). Although

being 'away from home' does not mean that they have completely left home, like the ascetic nationalists. To unfold this equation, Pandey challenges the 'women managed the home, men the world' proposition, and unpacks the contradiction that men were dependent on "family, home, women, servants, and other subordinates while they pursued their public work" (p. 83). The chapter titled Discipline shifts the focus to "professional middle classes who were from the Partition and Independence generation" (p. 85). Pandey observes that these new middle classes were not completely free from the "old beliefs regarding natural inheritances of men and women, their innate qualities, roles, and responsibilities" (p. 109), and hence the gendered division of 'the home' and 'the world' remained intact. This chapter also outlines that the "contradictory pulls of freedom and discipline" are also related to the gendered division of the domestic and public spheres, and they affect the modern family in unlikely ways (p. 110). Chapter 5, titled Dignity, focuses on the question of the lower-class and lower-caste publics and their sense of 'family'. Here, Pandey explores the gendered aspects of the Dalit assertions and outlines their shortcomings, where the signs of "(re)entrenchment of modern patriarchy" were present, and the "needs of the boys and men continued to be privileged, and those of girls and women dismissed" (p. 126). Here, we can find certain anecdotes to explore the theme of Dalit masculinity.

The third part, titled 'History in a Visceral Register', explores what we can call the cultural aspects of manliness, in general. 'The Things Men Touched' is the title of the first chapter of this part, which deals with the omnipresent idea in the Indian context- Untouchability. How men from upper castes and classes avoided labour in general and sanitation work, in particular, is the opening question of the chapter (p. 137), and hence the interrogation of 'touch'. In the seventh and final chapter, titled 'The Nature of Men', Pandey examines what men think of women, what men think of themselves, and what women think of men's thinking of themselves. The last part interests Pandey the most.

Although the book carries the danger of compromising plurality while imposing singularity in various socio-political contexts, in totality, through examining the contents of autobiographies of 'famous Men', Pandey provides us with a register of occurrences and accidents in the domestic and personal lives of these men, which can help us to enrich our understanding of manliness, masculinity and the structure of power relations in the domestic spheres of life. The book can also be helpful for students and researchers of history, sociology, and culture for the very mindful use of sensitive archival material like autobiographies.

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