



Constructing Manhood, Performing Power: Hegemonic and Toxic Masculinities in Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

Masculinity is not merely a biological condition of being male but a social process through which societies define what it means to be a man. Ideas of manhood are shaped by family, community, religion, customary institutions, political structures, economic conditions and cultural traditions. This paper examines the construction of masculinity in Northeast India, with particular attention to hegemonic and toxic forms of masculinity. It argues that there is no single model of masculinity in the region because Northeast India is socially, culturally and historically diverse. Masculine identities are produced differently across patrilineal, matrilineal and politically distinct communities. The paper examines customary institutions, origin myths, folktales, warrior traditions, headhunting, colonialism, Christianity, militarisation, ethnic politics, migration, queer identities and contemporary digital cultures to understand how ideas of manhood have changed over time. Particular attention is given to Naga and Mao contexts, with examples from Khasi, Mizo, Meitei and other communities used comparatively. The paper also draws on a small exploratory questionnaire involving men in their twenties and thirties to understand contemporary ideas of the “real man.” The paper argues that qualities such as courage, strength, independence, responsibility and leadership are not inherently harmful. They become problematic when linked to domination, violence, emotional suppression, misogyny, homophobia or the exclusion of others. Toxic masculinity in Northeast India should therefore be understood historically and contextually rather than as an inherent characteristic of men or Indigenous societies.

Keywords: Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Toxic Masculinity, Gender, Customary Law, Indigenous Communities

Introduction

Masculinity encompasses the ideas, expectations and practices by which a society defines what it means to be a man. Being biologically male does not automatically determine how a person should behave, speak, work, express emotions or exercise authority. These expectations are learned through family, community, religion, education, peer groups and cultural institutions. Men are expected to be strong, independent, courageous, rational, responsible and capable of protecting and providing for their families. These qualities may be valued differently across societies and historical periods.

Studies on Masculinity developed alongside feminist scholarship. Feminist scholars demonstrated that gender is not simply a natural difference between men and women but is connected to structures of power. Their work also showed that patriarchy affects both women and men by assigning them particular roles and expectations. Masculinity studies emerged partly from this intellectual background and gradually began to examine men not simply as holders of power but also as people who are themselves shaped by gender expectations (Gardiner, 2002).

The development of masculinity studies was closely linked to wider debates within feminism, sexuality studies and men's studies. By the late twentieth century, scholars increasingly questioned the notion of a single universal form of masculinity. Men differed by class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion and social position. Masculinity therefore came to be understood as plural and changing rather than fixed. Gardiner (2002) argues that masculinity studies and feminist theory are closely related because both examine gender as a social and cultural system.

One of the most influential concepts in masculinity studies is hegemonic masculinity, developed most prominently by Raewyn Connell. Connell's approach shifted attention away from the idea that all men possess the same form of masculinity. Instead, different masculinities exist within the same society, and some forms become more socially powerful than others. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the form of masculinity that occupies the dominant position within a particular gender order and helps legitimise men's authority over women and the hierarchy among men themselves (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the masculinity performed by the majority of men. Rather, it represents an ideal against which men may measure themselves.

The concept of toxic masculinity is relevant to these discussions but should not be treated as a synonym for masculinity, let alone hegemonic masculinity. Toxic masculinity refers more specifically to harmful expectations and behaviours associated with manhood, including aggressive domination, excessive competition, emotional restriction, misogyny, homophobia and violence. Kupers (2005), for example, links toxic masculinity to aggressive competition and domination and examines its relationship with hegemonic masculinity. Thus, masculinity itself should not be described as toxic. It is particular gender norms and practices that become harmful when they encourage domination, violence or the suppression of human emotions.

These debates are particularly important for understanding Northeast India. The region is often described as a single geographical and cultural space, yet this framing can obscure substantial differences among its communities. The Northeast comprises numerous tribal and non-tribal societies, with communities that have patrilineal and matrilineal systems, distinct customary laws, diverse religious traditions, and varied political histories. Masculinity therefore cannot be discussed as though there were a single "Northeast Indian masculinity."

In several Naga societies, for example, customary institutions and political authority have historically been associated strongly with men. Recent studies have shown that customary laws can provide social cohesion while simultaneously reproducing gender inequalities in property, political participation and decision-making (Longkoi, 2024; Yanthan, 2023). At the same time, Khasi society provides an important contrast because descent and inheritance are traditionally organised through the female line. Yet the practice of matriliney did not automatically eliminate patriarchy. Studies of Khasi society have shown that men continue to exercise considerable influence in political and social institutions (Nongbri, 2000).

The present paper therefore examines masculinity as a historical and cultural process. It asks how

ideas of manhood have been constructed through myths, customary laws, family structures, warrior traditions, religion, political conflict, migration and contemporary youth culture. It also examines when socially valued forms of masculinity become harmful or “toxic”.

The central argument of this paper is that toxic masculinity in Northeast India should not be understood as an inherent characteristic of men. Instead, it emerges unevenly from particular social expectations about authority, strength, protection, emotional control, heterosexuality, political leadership and male responsibility. These expectations have changed over time and are currently being challenged by education, women’s movements, migration, Christianity, queer visibility, changing family relations and digital culture.

Research Questions and Objectives

The paper is guided by five major questions. First, how are masculine identities constructed and legitimised in selected societies in Northeast India? Second, how do customary institutions, oral traditions, property relations and political structures contribute to the formation of masculine authority? Third, under what conditions do masculine expectations become harmful through emotional suppression, violence, misogyny, homophobia or domination? Fourth, how are traditional ideas of masculinity being renegotiated through Christianity, education, migration, militarisation, queer visibility and digital culture? Finally, how do ethnicity, class, minority status and other social positions influence the ways in which men experience and perform masculinity?

The main objective is to examine masculinity not as a fixed characteristic but as a social and historical process. The paper also seeks to clarify the relationship between hegemonic and toxic masculinity and to examine how cultural traditions and institutions shape ideas of manhood. Another objective is to bring Northeast India into wider debates in masculinity studies, which have often focused more heavily on Western societies or other parts of South Asia.

Methodology and Sources

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach. It brings together existing scholarship on masculinity and gender with studies of Northeast Indian societies, customary institutions, oral traditions and contemporary social change. The paper uses an interdisciplinary approach because masculinity cannot be adequately understood through history alone. Anthropology, sociology, gender studies, political studies and cultural studies all provide useful perspectives.

The source is mainly from existing secondary literature on Northeast Indian societies.

Oral traditions, origin stories, myths and folktales are also used as cultural sources. These materials are not treated as direct historical records. Instead, they are read as cultural narratives that can reveal ideas about gender, authority, descent, courage, protection and social expectations. Such narratives can tell us how communities have imagined the relationship between men and women and how particular forms of behaviour have been valued.

The paper also draws on an exploratory online questionnaire conducted among approximately thirty men in their mid-twenties to late thirties, of whom twenty-five responded. The central question was: “Who is a real man according to you?” The responses were examined thematically rather than statistically. Several respondents associated manhood with independence, rational thinking and decision-making. Some respondents did not answer, while a few responded sarcastically or interpreted the question as an attack on men or as part of a feminist argument.

These responses are not presented as representative of all men in Northeast India. The sample was small and based on online participation. Its value lies in providing a small window into contemporary understandings of manhood. The responses are therefore used as exploratory material rather than as general statistical evidence.

The paper also draws on the author’s participatory observations of social media and online gaming spaces. These spaces frequently involve competition, teasing, insults, arguments and performances of strength. The observations are treated cautiously because they do not constitute a systematic survey of online behaviour. They are used mainly to show how contemporary digital spaces can provide new arenas in which young people perform and negotiate masculinity.

Literature Review

Feminist scholarship played a major role in developing the study of masculinity. Earlier gender scholarship often concentrated on women's oppression, but feminist analysis also created the conceptual space to ask how men are socialised into particular forms of behaviour. Masculinity studies subsequently examined how men learn to perform gender and how masculine identities are connected to power, sexuality, class and race (Gardiner, 2002).

The relationship between feminism and masculinity studies has not always been straightforward. Some men's movements developed partly in reaction to feminism. The masculinist or mythopoetic men's movement, for example, often argued that modern society had weakened traditional masculine identities and called for a recovery of masculine values. Such approaches differ significantly from feminist and pro-feminist approaches that examine how masculine privilege and gender inequality are produced. The distinction is important because not every criticism of traditional masculinity is necessarily a criticism of men. Feminist scholarship generally questions systems of power rather than men's existence or identity. The purpose is to understand how gender expectations affect everyone.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity remains central to contemporary masculinity studies. Connell (2005) argues that there are multiple masculinities, each occupying a distinct position within gender relations. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) later revised and developed the concept, emphasising that hegemonic masculinity varies across historical and geographical contexts. Hegemonic masculinity is therefore best understood as a culturally dominant model of manhood. In one setting, physical strength and warriorhood may be especially valued; in another, educational success, economic achievement or professional authority may be emphasised. Different societies construct different ideals.

Connell's model also identifies relationships among hegemonic, complicit, subordinated and marginalised masculinities. Men who do not fully embody the dominant ideal may still benefit from the broader patriarchal order. At the same time, men whose masculinity is associated with homosexuality, poverty, ethnicity or other marginal positions may be treated as less legitimate.

This framework is particularly useful for Northeast India because masculinity is shaped not only by gender but also by ethnicity, Indigenous identity, religion, migration and minority status.

The term toxic masculinity has become widely used in contemporary discussions of gender. It refers to forms of masculinity that encourage harmful behaviours or attitudes. Kupers (2005) links toxic masculinity with aggressive competition, domination and other socially destructive behaviours. However, strength, courage, independence, leadership or competitiveness are not fundamentally toxic. They become problematic when they are connected with the belief that men must dominate others, cannot express vulnerability, must use violence to establish authority or must prove their masculinity through sexual conquest.

It is also important not to treat toxic masculinity as something that exists only among a small group of "bad men." Masculine expectations can be deeply embedded in institutions and everyday social practices. Men themselves may experience pressure to conform to them. A boy who is repeatedly told not to cry, for example, may learn that emotional vulnerability is incompatible with being a man.

Indian gender scholarship has shown that gender relations cannot be separated from caste, class, religion and social institutions. Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy is particularly important because it demonstrates how caste and gender are interconnected (Chakravarti, 1993). Her later work continues to emphasise the need to understand women's position within structures of power rather than simply describing their "status" (Chakravarti, 2003). Kumkum Roy (2010) and Romila Thapar (2010) similarly demonstrate the importance of examining gender historically rather than assuming that present-day gender arrangements are timeless. Masculinity in India has been shaped by social hierarchy, family structures, caste, religion, colonialism and political change.

Radhika Chopra's work is particularly useful for the study of Indian masculinities because it

highlights men who actively participate in reshaping gender relations. Chopra (2007) shows that men are not simply defenders of patriarchy; some men challenge gender inequality and develop supportive, caring forms of masculinity.

Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework of this paper is based on Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. It is supplemented by feminist theories of gender, intersectionality and gender performativity. These perspectives allow masculinity to be understood as something that is repeatedly produced through social practices.

Gender performativity is useful because masculinity is not simply something that men possess. It is something they repeatedly perform through behaviour, dress, speech, occupation, relationships and social interaction. A man may demonstrate masculinity by taking responsibility for his family, participating in community institutions, displaying physical strength, controlling his emotions or presenting himself as independent.

It also uses an intersectional approach where masculinity is viewed as affected by ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, age and political location. A wealthy urban man, a rural farmer, a migrant from the Northeast living in Delhi and a young man living in a conflict-affected village may experience masculinity very differently.

This approach is particularly relevant to Northeast India. McDuié-Ra's research shows that the masculinity of tribal men from the Northeast can be affected by migration, racism, minority status, ethnic identity and memories of militarisation (McDuié-Ra, 2012, 2013). Masculinity, therefore, cannot be separated from the wider political and social experience of being from the Northeast.

Gender, Customary Authority and Regional Diversity

One of the most important features of Northeast India is its cultural diversity. There is no single gender system that can describe all communities. Some societies are predominantly patrilineal, while others are matrilineal. Those communities in the hills have strong customary political institutions, while others in the valleys and plains have been more deeply shaped by kingdoms, state institutions and other forms of political authority.

In many Naga societies, descent, property and political authority have traditionally been closely associated with men. Studies of Naga customary law show that men continue to dominate several areas of community decision-making and political authority (Longkoi, 2024; Yanthan, 2023). The Morung, for example, historically served important educational, social and political functions for young men. Such institutions fostered male identity and community responsibility, but they also helped establish male-centred forms of public authority. This does not mean that Naga women lacked power. Women contributed substantially to agriculture, household production, trade and community life. Their economic importance was often considerable. However, economic contribution did not always translate into equal political authority or property rights.

The Chakhesang Naga and Khasi examples demonstrate the value of comparison. Research on food provisioning among Khasi and Chakhesang communities found that women play major roles in agricultural production and food-related activities, while men continue to exercise greater influence in community decision-making (Ellena & Nongkynrih, 2018). This shows that women's economic contribution and men's political authority can coexist.

Khasi society provides another important example. Matriliney gives women important rights in descent and inheritance, but it did not automatically eliminate male authority. Nongbri (2000) demonstrated that Khasi women may enjoy greater security in certain areas while men continue to dominate several political and institutional spaces. More recent scholarship has also questioned the assumption that matriliney is automatically equivalent to gender equality.

Therefore, today gender scholars examine both patriliney and matriliney critically. The important question is not simply whether descent follows the male or female line, but who controls property, political institutions, customary law and public decision-making. In the societies of Northeast India, masculinity encompasses the attributes of a public sphere dominated and controlled by men.

Origin Myths, Folktales and the Cultural Imagination of Masculinity

Origin myths provide an important way of examining cultural ideas about gender. They do not necessarily tell us exactly how people lived in the past. Instead, they provide symbolic narratives through which communities explain their origins, relationships and values.

The Mao origin tradition provides an interesting example. In the version considered in this study, the first mysterious human woman, Dziilimosiio, gives birth to three sons associated with different realms: the tiger Okhe, the spirit Ora and the human Omei. Omei, the youngest, becomes the ancestor of human beings. The narrative places the continuation of the human line through a male descendant.

The story can therefore be read as a cultural narrative in which motherhood is connected with creation and life, while social continuity and descent become associated with the male line. Such a reading does not mean that the myth “proves” that Mao society was patriarchal. Rather, it shows how ideas about descent, gender and social continuity can be represented symbolically.

Other creation traditions in Northeast India also offer interesting points of comparison. Some Mizo traditions place a powerful female divine figure at the beginning of creation, while later social organisation establishes male authority in political or protective roles. In Donyi-Polo traditions, the relationship between creation, divine power and social order similarly provides material for thinking about gendered authority.

Feminine power and masculine power are not always represented in exactly the same way. Women may be associated with fertility, birth and the continuation of life, while men may be associated with protection, political authority, land and public decision-making. These symbolic patterns should be examined alongside actual social practices rather than treated as direct evidence of them. Folktales can also reveal the different standards applied to men and women. In the Mao story of Kapuni, for example, a woman takes revenge for her brother by taking the head of the person responsible for his death. Her action can be read as an act of courage and resistance, yet her morality is questioned because headhunting is not normally expected of women. Male headhunters, in contrast, were traditionally associated with courage, honour and protection. This contrast is significant because it shows that violence itself is not always judged in the same way when performed by men and women. A behaviour that establishes masculine honour may be condemned when performed by a woman. Such differences reveal how societies create gendered boundaries around acceptable behaviour.

Warriorhood, Headhunting and Masculine Prestige

Warriorhood provides one of the clearest historical examples of the relationship between masculinity and social status in several Northeast Indian societies. Among the Konyaks and other Naga societies, headhunting was historically associated with courage, prestige, protection and community status. A successful warrior could gain social recognition and demonstrate his ability to defend his community. The importance of warriorhood should not be interpreted simply as evidence of violence. In its historical context, warrior identity could be connected with community protection, territorial security, honour and social recognition. At the same time, it established a gendered hierarchy in which certain forms of physical courage and violence became important markers of respected manhood.

The institution of the Morung was closely connected to this process. Young men learned community responsibilities, traditions and skills in institutions that also helped create bonds among men. Such institutions produced what can be described as a form of masculine community identity. Recent research has questioned the older colonial description of Naga society as simply egalitarian and democratic. Longkoi (2024), for example, argues that customary institutions and folklore could reproduce gender inequality, particularly in relation to political authority. Yanthan (2023) similarly shows that customary practices can give men greater control over status, resources and decision-making.

Regardless, customary institutions cannot be dismissed as purely oppressive. They historically performed important social functions. The more useful approach is to examine both their contributions to community life and their gendered limitations.

Colonialism, Christianity and the Reconfiguration of Masculinity

Colonialism brought significant changes to gender relations in Northeast India. British administrative systems, missionary education, Christianity, new forms of employment and formal schooling all contributed to changes in social organisation.

Christianity introduced new moral ideas about family life, sexuality, marriage and gender behaviour. Head-hunting practices were criticised by missionaries as immoral or backward. Christian institutions created new forms of education and social organisation, replacing the Morung. These changes sometimes challenged existing practices and also created new forms of authority.

It would therefore be too simplistic to describe Christianity as either liberating or oppressive. Its impact varied across communities and historical periods. Missionary education opened new opportunities for women and men, while new religious institutions sometimes established male-centred forms of leadership. Similarly, colonial education created new opportunities but also encouraged Indigenous communities to view some of their own traditions through colonial categories.

Colonialism also changed ideas of respectable manhood. Education, Christianity, wage employment and contact with colonial institutions created new expectations around discipline, literacy, clothing, family responsibility and public behaviour. Masculinity was therefore not simply replaced but reworked.

Militarisation, Ethno-Nationalism and Masculine Performance

The political history of Northeast India cannot be separated from questions of masculinity. Armed conflict, militarisation and ethnic nationalism have affected the everyday lives of men and women across the region. Armed movements have complex political, historical and economic causes. McDuire-Ra (2012) shows how tribal masculinity among migrants from Northeast India can be shaped by memories of warrior traditions, armed struggle and ethnic nationalism. Masculinity may become associated with courage, physical strength, community defence and resistance. At the same time, migration and life outside the Northeast can challenge these established ideas of manhood.

The post-Independence period in India and the integration of states into the Indian Union created fresh wounds in many of the regions of the Northeast. Political grievances and the desire for self-determination for their homelands encouraged militarisation and insurgencies in the region. Many of these societies had traditions in which men were trained and brought up to display the highest forms of masculinity. The colonial and post-colonial experiences that disrupted this system were inherently expressed in the taking up of arms for their homeland, where they could again perform and showcase their masculinity. As the medieval knights of Europe, once accustomed to acts of war, defence and bloodshed, found their lost purpose in the crusades, the same can be imagined in the case of militarisation and insurgency in the region as well. Although the circumstances were different, the release of frustration and the display of masculinity were evident.

If one looks at these developments from the perspective of an outsider, they can appear as toxic masculinity. However, when the experiences of the people are considered, the concept of militarised masculinity fits better than simply describing insurgent men as “toxic.” It allows the analysis to examine how warrior ideals, political identity and masculine honour can become connected without reducing complex political conflicts to gender alone.

Queer and Gender-Nonconforming Masculinities

Masculinity is also defined through ideas about sexuality. In many societies, being a “proper man” is closely associated with heterosexuality, marriage and the ability to fulfil expected family roles. Men who do not conform to these expectations may be mocked, excluded or treated as less

masculine. This is where the concept of toxic masculinity becomes particularly relevant. Homophobia and the rejection of gender-nonconforming behaviour can be understood as mechanisms through which dominant forms of masculinity are protected. If masculinity requires men to demonstrate heterosexuality and emotional toughness, then men who express themselves differently can become targets of ridicule.

The legal environment in India has changed significantly since the Supreme Court's 2018 judgment in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, which decriminalised consensual same-sex relations between adults. Legal change, however, does not automatically produce social acceptance. In Northeast India, questions of queer identity are particularly salient because gender and sexuality intersect with community identity and customary expectations. Contemporary queer people may negotiate family expectations, religious beliefs, community norms and urban social spaces simultaneously. Recent research on queer students in Assam has documented experiences of concealment, harassment, conservative social attitudes and emotional strain within higher-education institutions. Drawing on qualitative research with 21 queer students across eight higher-education institutions in Assam, Das and Mahjebeen (2026) found that dominant gender binaries, conservative attitudes and inadequate institutional support contributed to concealment, harassment and emotional distress. These findings suggest that gender and sexual diversity continue to challenge established expectations about masculinity, femininity and acceptable gender identities in educational spaces.

The rejection of queer and gender-nonconforming people can therefore be understood as another dimension of gendered power. Hegemonic masculinity is maintained not only through men's authority over women but also through the marginalisation of masculinities that do not conform to dominant expectations. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explain that hegemonic masculinity is produced through relationships among masculinities, including the subordination of those positioned as less legitimate. From this perspective, homophobia and the policing of gender expression can reinforce dominant ideas of what a "proper" man should be. Thus, masculine power operates not only by controlling women but also by regulating the boundaries of acceptable masculinity.

Migration, Racism and the Remaking of Northeast Masculinities

Masculinity in Northeast India is also shaped by experiences outside the region. Large numbers of young people from the Northeast migrate to cities such as Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai and other urban centres for education and employment. Migration exposes them to new social expectations. McDuié-Ra (2012, 2013) has shown that tribal men from the Northeast experience masculinity differently upon moving to Delhi. Their identity as tribal men become connected with experiences of racial discrimination, minority status, migration and changing gender relations.

This creates a complicated situation. At home, a man may be expected to demonstrate authority, responsibility and community leadership. In an urban setting outside the Northeast, however, many Northeast Indian men experience discrimination because of their appearance, accent, clothing or ethnic identity. Their masculinity has therefore become insecure and contested.

Some Northeast men have also reported being stereotyped or feminised because of their physical appearance or clothing. Such experiences complicate the conventional understanding of masculinity because men who may occupy privileged positions within their own communities can become minorities in other social environments.

Masculinity is therefore relational. A man can experience privilege in one context and marginalisation in another. This is one reason why a regional study of masculinity must consider ethnicity, race and migration alongside gender.

Youth, Social Media and Online Gaming

Northeast Indian youths are active online gamers and users of other digital platforms, such as social media. Contemporary digital spaces have created new environments in which young people perform masculinity. Social media, online gaming and digital communication allow individuals to

construct identities before large, often anonymous audiences.

Online gaming is particularly interesting because many games are built around competition, combat, victory and strategic domination. Players may be rewarded for defeating opponents, demonstrating skill and refusing to show weakness. These characteristics can overlap with traditional masculine ideals of strength, competition and warriorhood. It is also observed that male players who play masculine male characters rather than feminine or female characters in games are seen as manly. On the other hand, those who play female characters are teased as 'gay' and feminine. On such platforms, the use of aggressive language is common. Insults, sexist comments, homophobic abuse and racist jokes largely become part of competitive interactions. The anonymity of online spaces makes such behaviour easier.

However, it would be incorrect to claim that gaming is inherently masculine or that all male gamers behave in toxic ways. Women also participate actively in these gaming cultures, and many male gamers do not engage in abusive behaviour. The important point is that digital spaces offer another arena in which ideas about masculinity can be performed.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok have also created spaces for men to showcase their talents, especially in reel-making, dancing and imitating female models. Many young men engage in feminine performances, which illustrates how masculinity is negotiated in the digital world. There are also other men who create videos on bodybuilding, encouraging the masculine ideals of strength, control and dominance.

The online environment has therefore reproduced older masculine values while also creating and negotiating new forms of masculinity. Many young men today demonstrate his status through gaming ability rather than physical strength. Digital performances have thus become another way of proving competence and social worth. It has also encouraged men to be more expressive.

The Exploratory Questionnaire: "Who Is a Real Man?"

The exploratory online questionnaire conducted among men from different communities in the region offers a brief insight into how contemporary men understand masculinity. The question "Who is a real man according to you?" was deliberately open-ended to allow respondents to define masculinity in their own words.

Among the twenty-five responses, several participants associated manhood with independence, rational thinking and decision-making. These responses are significant because they reflect qualities that are commonly associated with adult male responsibility. A "real man" is expected to be able to make decisions, solve problems, and stand on his own.

Such responses do not automatically represent toxic masculinity. Independence and rational decision-making can be positive qualities. The problem emerges when these qualities become rigid expectations, for example, when a man is told that he must never ask for help, admit fear or express emotional vulnerability.

Some respondents did not answer the question, while a few responded sarcastically or treated the question as an attack on men. This reaction is itself interesting. It suggests that questions about masculinity can become politically sensitive because some people interpret criticism of masculine norms as criticism of men themselves.

This small questionnaire therefore supports the paper's broader argument, but it is not used to claim that all men in Northeast India share these views. Rather, it demonstrates the usefulness of asking men directly how they understand manhood.

Discussion and Conclusion

The examples discussed above show why hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity need to be distinguished. Hegemonic masculinity refers to a socially dominant model of manhood. Toxic masculinity refers to particular harmful expectations and practices that may emerge within or around such a model.

For example, courage can be an important social virtue. But it becomes problematic when a man is expected to prove himself through violence. Responsibility can be positive, but it can become

harmful when a man believes that asking for help is a sign of weakness. Sexual confidence may be valued, but it becomes harmful when it involves coercion or disrespect. Leadership may be respected, but it becomes oppressive when it denies women the right to participate. The same quality can therefore have different meanings depending on how it is practised.

The Northeast Indian context also shows that masculinity cannot be separated from local histories. In some communities, warriorhood and protection were central to male identity. In others, agriculture and family responsibilities may have been more important. In contemporary urban settings, education, employment and professional success may increasingly define respectable manhood.

Masculinity is therefore constantly changing. The central question is not whether traditional masculinity should simply disappear. Instead, the question is which elements of masculine identity should be retained, challenged or transformed.

This distinction is also important because men themselves can be harmed by rigid expectations of masculinity. A man who has been taught never to cry may struggle to express grief. A man expected to provide for his family may feel ashamed when he becomes unemployed. A young man who believes that asking for help is a weakness may avoid seeking support during emotional difficulties.

This is why the critique of toxic masculinity should not be understood as an attack on men. It can also be seen as an attempt to foster healthier forms of masculinity in which men can be strong without being violent, responsible without being controlling, and emotionally resilient without being emotionally silent.

An important part of the discussion should therefore be the possibility of alternative masculinities. Masculinity does not have to be based on domination. Men can demonstrate strength through care, responsibility, cooperation and emotional maturity. Chopra (2007) provides an important framework for thinking about men who actively support gender equality. Such men challenge the assumption that caring work, emotional expression and gender equality are feminine concerns.

In Northeast India, alternative masculinities can also emerge through evolving educational opportunities, migration, women's participation in public life, shifting family structures and greater visibility of LGBTQ+ identities. Young men may increasingly encounter models of masculinity that value friendship, emotional openness, caregiving and equality.

This does not mean that traditional identities must be rejected outright. Cultural traditions can provide belonging, a sense of responsibility and community solidarity. The task is to distinguish between cultural practices that strengthen community life and those that deny equality or normalise violence.

Masculinity in Northeast India is complex, diverse and constantly changing. It cannot be reduced to a single regional model of the "Northeast Indian man." Different communities have developed different ideas about male authority, family responsibility, property, warfare, leadership and emotional behaviour.

The study of origin myths, folktales and customary institutions shows that ideas about masculinity are deeply connected to cultural memory. In some traditions, men are associated with descent, protection, land, political authority and warriorhood, while women may be associated with fertility, labour and the continuation of family life. These narratives do not directly prove how people behaved in the past, but they offer important insights into the cultural imagination of gender.

Customary institutions also reveal the complexity of gender relations. Naga customary law, for example, has played an important role in maintaining community identity while also creating gender inequalities in political participation, property ownership and decision-making. Khasi matriliney presents a different situation in which women have important rights through descent and inheritance, while men may continue to exercise authority in public institutions.

Colonialism, Christianity, education and modernisation have further transformed these relationships. Subsequent developments, including militarisation, ethnic nationalism and migration, have created additional forms of masculine identity. Northeast men may experience masculine privilege within their communities while simultaneously facing racial discrimination and minority

status outside the region.

The contemporary period has brought further change. Queer visibility, women's movements, social media and digital gaming have challenged older ideas about what men should be. At the same time, some online spaces reproduce aggressive and exclusionary forms of masculinity.

The small questionnaire used in this study suggests that ideas of the "real man" remain connected with independence, rationality and decision-making. These qualities are not inherently harmful. They become problematic when they are transformed into rigid expectations that prevent men from expressing vulnerability, seeking help or accepting equality.

The central argument of this paper is that masculinity itself should not be treated as the problem. The problem lies in particular forms of masculinity that depend on domination, emotional suppression, violence, misogyny, homophobia or exclusion. Toxic masculinity is therefore be studied as a historically produced and socially maintained phenomenon rather than as an inherent characteristic of men.

A more productive future for masculinity in Northeast India would not require men to abandon strength, courage, responsibility or cultural identity. Instead, these qualities can be redefined. Strength can include emotional resilience; courage can include the courage to reject violence; responsibility can include care work; leadership can include listening; and manhood can include respect for women, queer people and other gender identities. This study of masculinity in Northeast India is therefore not simply a study of men. It is a study of power, culture, identity and social change. Understanding how manhood is constructed allows us to understand how gender relations can also be transformed.

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