

The South Asian Perspective(s): Desi & disabled*

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Gender Transcript • 36:42 mins

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SPEAKERS

Danny, Grishma, Dev, Madhubala, Helen, Dharmendra, Rekha

(Suspenseful music fades in)

Danny 00:04

As a guy it wouldn't matter what time I came home. But my sister had rules, couldn't stay out late. So again, not so much as male role, or male rules, versus women rules, I think it's just based on the society we grew up in, it was not safe for women to stay out longer. Bombay was probably the safest city when you grew up, right, compared to some of the other cities, especially like Delhi, and you hear about things there...Because of molestation and rapes and all of that, it was not safe for a woman to stay up later...We can have these mock conversations about, shouldn't the boys be taught about it? The fact of the matter is who's teaching your boys, where do those boys come from? What backgrounds do these boys come from? From my family's perspective, and from a lot of other families, it is easier to control what's within your control, which is their children versus go after random men on the streets. You're not going to change their attitude by screaming at them. They should have been taught from the time they were children. Unfortunately, those, those values weren't inculcated in them when they were children. Unfortunately, their children are going to be the same...

(Suspenseful music fades out)

You know, the funny thing about privilege is, you don't see it until somebody points to you. So unfortunately (heavy sigh) if we hadn't talked about the curfew story, I wouldn't

even think of it as a privilege, right. In terms of clothing, I think, there was a sort of decorum that you had to follow it as a, as a girl. You know, no cleavage, longer skirts and all of that stuff. I could wear shorts all I wanted. But again, that depends on my wife doesn't have that, those restrictions. So, yeah, it's difficult to answer privilege as a boy, unless a girl can tell me, she couldn't do that. Then I can say, oh, yeah, yeah, I don't have a problem, you know.

(Calming soft music begins)

Grishma 02:34

Welcome to the episode on gender. What does gender mean? Good question. I want us to think of gender along the lines of sex-based social structures. You'll understand what I mean when you listen to what Danny, Madhubala and Dev Anand have to say about gender norms growing up. Just a little heads up, the voices and names of all storytellers have been changed to respect their privacy. Danny is in his thirties and has lived in the United States for about a decade. He was born in India and grew up there. He was born into a Catholic family and currently works for a Fortune 500 company. He does have a sibling, a younger sister. Next is Madhubala, who's in the medical profession and is forty-something. She was born in the United States into a Hindu family. Her mom and dad belong to different castes. In Desi culture, the child espouses not only the father's name, but also the caste he belongs to. Madhubala has one sibling, a younger brother. We'll address caste in a different episode, but I thought that this might be a good opportunity to show you how different parts of our identities intersect. And even though each episode is dedicated to a different facet of the Desi culture, you'll notice from time to time that some of these parts bleed into each other.

(Calming soft music ends)

Madhubala 04:30

I truly actually didn't like high school and a lot of it had to do with what I was allowed and not allowed to do. So growing up Desi was hard societal norms, explaining to my friends why I can't come over for a sleepover or like, stay out past eight o'clock. Things like that, was hard. And especially because my brother was doing all these things. He was out till 1 am. He had like 10 times more freedom than I did. Like all the festivals, I was only allowed to hang out with my family. Like, I could only hang out with my cousins. I could never hang out with friends and stuff like that. I remember I got into the soccer team. And to get in like, freshman year was really easy. You kind of have to play privately as well, to make it to the higher levels. And I remember, my dad was like, Yeah, I've got to work. I'm not, I'm not going to be able to take you to all these things. But like

when it came to my brother, that was never a concern. So there was a huge disparity of how I was brought up, and how my brother was brought up.

05:46 (Calming soft music begins)

Grishma 05:53

Our third storyteller, Dev Anand was born in the UK. This thirty-something entrepreneur lives in the United States. If you're a movie buff, you've probably noticed a pattern. Each alias name comes from the land of Bollywood.

(Calming soft music ends)

Dev 06:11

For my sister, it was a little bit more easy, the environment was more accepting, should we put it. You obviously had the stereotype identities going into it. You know, you are a boy, I will get you a boy's bike, which is black. And you're a girl and I will get you a girl's bike, which is pink, and it has wheels on the side. You're a boy, so I'll get you, whatever an action man and you're a girl, and I'll get you a Barbie doll. Clearly those gender identities were there from the start. In terms of how we got treated, beyond that, it was pretty even. There was, there was a lot of openness and communication. My dad who I, my mind, mind considers the far less egoic of my parents. To put into perspective, my mom does all the talking. My father, I mean, he spoke little. He spoke to give genuine direction. But beyond that he just didn't speak...I was my mom's favorite child. And my sister was my dad's favorite child. And so that read to me as though my mum, deeply full of thoughts, ego, cultural norms, tradition, division of caste as well chose the male. And my dad, who had very little division, he didn't really speak about division (chuckles). He didn't really speak much at all. He was more connected to silence, I would say. Between both parents, we were on level grounds, primarily because of my dad. Although my mum used to say, you know, she had like, traditional expectations for my sister, compared to my dad. Like, my dad was like, do what you want, you know, get married, don't get married. Just do whatever you want. Whereas my mum was like, Oh, you're gonna get married, aren't you? You're gonna you're gonna get married younger, aren't you? Yeah, yeah, she was, she was throwing a lot more onto her. She'd kind of spend a lot more time on to her when she's getting ready for like a Indian event or a wedding and stuff like that. So, but yeah, the two factors kind of evened out. Because, you know, my mom's very egoic, my father's completely the opposite. And between them, me and my sister were on par.

My cousin, her Gran, just passed away. And there was a very interesting story that my cousin used to tell me about her Gran. I used to know her in her late years and she was, she was a very lovely, warm, Indian, Gran. But one of the stories that, that I used to hear about her. My cousin, she has one sibling, an older sibling. And when that older sibling was born, the grandma basically said, *This is great. This is our heir, it's amazing that you had a boy*. Now when my cousin, when she was born, right, grandma, she said, I'm gonna, I'm gonna try to say it in Gujarati. She was like, *patro ne janam dido che, patro* (You gave birth to a stone). She basically called my cousin a *stone* or a *rock*, whatever. Right? Which is, like, amazing. That (laughing) like my cousin was born and because of a gender, she called her a *stone*. She was so deep rooted in this system where male and caste just as much means the world to her, right. And at that point in time, she already had a son (laughter). Like, it's not like she was, she was lacking. So it was crazy. And so my cousin growing up, she always resented her for that. So the insecurity in the Gran all of a sudden formed an insecurity in my cousin. And my cousin had to carry that with her over time. But then later on in time, I think that she's, she just lost importance. You know, she just accepts, she's like, *whatever, you know, she was just upset, angry, whatever you want to call it at the time. And I just shouldn't be worried about it*. So she was, she was still like, I mean, she still spoke to her Gran, in her later years, developed a connection with her. She still like, organized her like funeral and memorial services. So, so, so, it's interesting that we are, we are seeing transformation away from that generationally, and one of the big things in that is that we now see, and we are now exposed to, you know, people of so many, you know, physical, mental, and hereditary attributes, that it just doesn't matter anymore. There's like, there's so much diversity in the world, I just don't care. Like, everyone is unique, and everyone is amazing.

Grishma 11:58

While I was completing my PhD, I decided to do a program at Harvard University. Honestly, it almost killed me. But I did learn a lot. One of the things that I learned to do was assessing situations, through different lenses. And I want us to see this episode through the lens of power (Ganz, 2020). One way to look at power is by resources. So if, for example, I have a lot of resources, and you have little, then I have the power. But if you listener have the resources that I need, then you have the power over me. Either way, one benefits and one doesn't. But there's another way to look at power. Rather than power over someone, you can have power with someone. And that way, both parties benefit. If we look at the examples that Danny and Madhubala shared, it smells like a case of power over someone. The dominant person is the man. The men have the power to do whatever they want, wear whatever they want, and come home whatever time they want. The subordinates are the women, they had limited freedom. According to political scientists, James Scott (Scott, 1990; Ganz, 2020), there are four types of stories that come out of power, the dominant public story and the subordinate public story, are two

stories that come out of power. I would argue that Danny's reasoning for his sister having a curfew is a pretty strong, dominant public story. So strong that it crosses oceans and countries. As we know Madhubala was in the United States growing up, and yet she had limited freedom compared to her brother. The subordinate public story usually complements the dominant public story. Madhubala and her interview mentioned how her mom felt that without her husband, she didn't know what to do or how to survive. These public stories are what the world hears, the official stories. And according to James Scott, the private stories are where the gloves come off. There are some really great examples of this in the movie, *The White Tiger* with Priyanka Chopra, Jonas (Wikimedia, 2021). Let's just say the way the employee feels about his boss, and the way that he acts when his boss is around is slightly different. And for good reason. Madhubala's testimony is a great example of a subordinate private story. Because according to James Scott, it is the private stories where the injustice comes out, and possible solutions as well. We have no idea of what the dominant private story is. As the parent, the mom had more power than her daughter, but less power than her husband. And maybe she hated the fact that her daughter couldn't get private soccer lessons. But she kept quiet because she didn't want to ruffle any feathers. Madhubala's mom was complacent. If Madhubala or Danny's sister had resisted, and brought the injustices out in the open, it may have shifted a few things or caused more problems. We will never really know why Madhubala and her brother lived such different lives, even though they grew up under the same roof. The same goes for Danny and his sister.

There is another way to address power, a better way (Ganz, 2020), according to my professor Marshall Ganz. And that is power with someone.

Dharmendra 16:07

You are running after something, either you're running after degree, you're running after a good, good job, once you have good job, you want promotion, you want small house, big house, good car, you know you're running after stuff. And that, you have to work hard to achieve those. And when you work hard, you have less hours to spend with your loved ones, or doing the house chores. So you only have three or four hours and you have ten stuff. You just divide who is good with what and come up with a division method that, hey, I'm going to spend one and a half hour doing this, you spend one and a half hour. So at least you have a couple hours together. Changing the garbage and they take pride of it. Okay, holding this bag from here and walking twenty feet and cooking for two hours or one and a half hours, how, how it is equal?

Helen 16:57

I think people are starting to see why it is necessary that a girl should also be educated, that she should also pursue her own hobbies and things like that... Maybe adds to the workload of that individual, I would say it's, it should be a shared workload, not more workload for that person. But I also know... maybe she has to go to work from like, morning, when she comes back in the evening. She has to also like cook dinner for her family, take care of her kids and stuff like that. At least growing up, I knew of families having to do that, simply because the workload wasn't shared. If a husband, for example, is working from morning to evening, he comes home and just sits. But that's the same thing that the woman of the house is doing as well. But in addition, she also has to come home and then take care of all the cooking and all. But I think that's what I'm coming to, that now I see a lot more where both the partners kind of share the working load of family. Both of them are taking care of the kids, are taking turns, working shifts as well. So it's changing, but not at a faster rate (chuckles) because I would expect it to be.

Grishma 18:21

We just heard from Dharmendra and Helen. Dharmendra came to the United States for graduate school in his early twenties. He's currently in his forties and works for a Fortune 500 company. Helen is in her early thirties. She arrived to the United States four years ago to join her husband. Helen is an accountant. Dharmendra and Helen both mentioned that when we divide our resources equally, we all benefit. Helen mentioned how she's seeing more and more families that share the house load. Though it's not happening at a rate that she would like, it is happening. Dharmendra also presented a logical solution, division of labor based on time. Let's take me as an example. I'm an amputee, I only have one arm. Doing the dishes takes me double the time it takes someone with two hands, pretty logical, right? So it wouldn't make logical sense for me to dedicate one hour of my time to do the dishes when it takes someone else thirty minutes. So while the dishes are being cleaned by person x, I could dedicate the same thirty minutes to cleaning and vacuuming. In thirty minutes, the house becomes more cleaner, and everyone is happy. In the book *All About Love*, (Hooks, 2000), Hooks shares an example of what power can look like. There was a woman who's hubby worked out a plant and this woman was considering getting an advanced degree. But she was uncomfortable with the idea that she would be more educated than her husband. It also appeared that the hubby was not supportive of her going back to school. Yet she resisted, because she knew it would increase her self-esteem, and an advanced degree would help her family financially. The kids and hubby at times were unhappy about the increased responsibility of the housework. But the family persevered and benefited in the long run. At the end of the day, the sharing of the housework allowed for this woman to dedicate more time into her classes, and she was able to shift things around for the family in a financially positive way, while increasing her self esteem. As I mentioned

earlier, resistance may cause shifts to happen, good or bad. Hooks argues that because of the shame many of us faced as children, in school or at home, we learned a pattern of avoiding conflict, by not being fussy or keeping the peace as a way to avoid conflict. If you don't ruffle any feathers, you're less likely to upset people who have power over you. Maybe this is what Madhubala's mom was thinking, or even Madhubala. Each of them wanted to keep the peace. One time when Madhubala was in India with her mom, she saw a girl wearing shorts, and she told her mom how unfair it was that she couldn't wear shorts in America. In her interview, she mentioned that she questioned a lot of things. But in the end, she went along with the rules, like not wearing shorts, because it was easier to appease than to argue all the time. I'm sure many of us can relate.

In my experience, it was more common for the man to continue his education and get an advanced degree even after marriage and kids were in the picture. And this was in most households I visited, Desi and non-Desi alike. My PhD program has more women than men. Out of the eleven of us there are two men, both are married with kids. The demographics of the women are not so homogeneous. Some are divorced with kids, some are married with kids, some are not married, some have no kids. Though, the ones that are not married and have no kids (chuckles) might just be me and another woman. When I went in for my PhD interview, the second time I applied, I didn't even make it into the interview round the first time. One of the interviewers said they weren't convinced if I belonged in the program. I thought it was because I'm in the storytelling business. Much of my life revolves around films, film festivals, podcasts, artwork, stuff like that. Obviously, I got into the program since you're listening to this non-traditional dissertation, but I don't know what I said. It's all a blur. I just remember how much I was sweating when I was told that statement. As time went on, I thought deeply about what the interviewer said, and they weren't wrong. In my essays, my CV, my portfolio, I wasn't bragging about my accomplishments. It felt selfish to do so. Hooks mentions this in her book too (Hooks, 2000). She said that women who have been trained to be "good girls" or "dutiful daughters" are fearful of being self assertive. Because being self assertive is not considered very feminine. More often than not, folks may find that girls who voice their opinion are less desirable, and deem it as a negative trait. I've had many conversations with men and women where they said that Hillary Clinton wasn't very graceful when she ran for president. My response to that? If Hillary was Hilbert would we be having this discussion? Politics aside, even the author of All about love recalled an example from our own childhood where her brother didn't get punished for talking back, because it was seen as a positive sign of manhood voicing your opinion if you're a boy. After all, boys will be boys right? Maybe, maybe not. You would not believe the number of times, listener, I have re-recorded this very episode because I felt it was graceful enough, or that I was being too assertive and I didn't want to sound like a nag. My inner training of being a "good girl" or "dutiful daughter," I feel rises up each time I do something I consider bold. And I have to talk myself down from the ledge of fear.

Some days, I am triumphant. Other days, I am less so. If you can relate to this listener, Hooks suggests that we try affirmations (Hooks, 2000). When a negative thought enters your mind, replace it with a positive thought. If you can't think of a positive affirmation, you can use the one that Hooks used daily, sometimes multiple times a day, she would say to herself, *"I am breaking with all patterns and moving forward with my life."* I truly believe that if we want to move past old patterns, especially those of fear, we really do need to hear stories where equality made a difference. On that note, I want to share with you what Helen told me about how life was, growing up for her and her brother in India.

Helen 26:36

They were the same for both of us, both of us got equal encouragement, equal resources. It was not like, hey, you're a girl, you can't do this. Or like, just because he's a boy, he'll get more resources, or he can study whatever he wants. So it was not that. It was like whatever both of you want to do, you can go ahead and do. And my brother, he has, in fact, pursued his hobby as well. So you've been to dancing and stuff. So my mom was never like, you cannot be dancing, just because you're a boy, it's more like a gold thing to do or something like that. She was never in the way of what we wanted to do. Or she never categorized certain things as guy thing or girl thing to do.

I have come home by 5am in the morning, when my brother was actually leaving for work, and I was like coming home at that time. So, it was not a concern. Like as long as I informed my parents about where I would be going. And that was not because they wanted to have any control over me, that was more for them to be assured that you know, if for any reason they need to, like, reach me they know where I'm at. So as long as I informed them that I would be home by this time, and I'm going out today, so there's no cause for any worries or concerns, they were fine with it. Yeah, so I guess we didn't have different expectations. Not in my case. My mom told both of us once, I think it was the kind of job that we picked up, we were encouraged to find the jobs that we like, we will enjoy doing. And we will see our career in that job not just any random, like, you know, because my mom was also under pressure because when I spoke about those aunts. They would like, they would also tell her, right, *Why are you like encouraging your children to work so much? Your husband is the only earning member of the family. Look at the other children, they have already started working* and stuff like that. But she was convinced that a good education will like, get the children where they want. They'll also find the job that they want and settle in. When you want, if you want, you can get married to the person you want. It was never like, this was the way you'll do it. In fact, I was married at the age of thirty. But my family put pressure on it, like all the other relatives who are like, Hey, you are already thirty, you are already twenty-eight, twenty-six, or whatever. But my mom said unless you feel that it's the right time, it's the

right person, I leave that choice to you. I think a lot of the way we are, or our personalities is because of the way our parents brought us up. The thinking is also like, on similar lines. Now because I was brought up in a particular way, I will pass on these things as well right, because that's how I was brought up. I was given, like the importance that were based on certain things was much more than the others, like, your beauty, your skin color took a very, like even if outsiders spoke about it, in your house nobody spoke about it, so.
(Upbeat music begins)

Grishma 29:50

Before we conclude this episode on gender, I wanted to talk about the story Dev Anand shared with us a little earlier. You know, the one about his girl cousin being called a stone the day she was born. In my experience, when people find out that they're having a boy, it is surely a cause for celebration. But when people find out that they're having a girl, there is celebration, maybe. As Dev mentioned, the conditioning of the cousin's grandmother was very strong. In her mind, boy meant continuation of family lineage and a girl meant stone.

(Upbeat music ends)

To give you more context, on how deep this conditioning can go, a PubMed article (Imam, 1994), from 1994 stated that 70% of all abortions performed in Delhi, India's capital was because the fetus was female. What was the reasoning for the preference of boy over girl? According to the article, female feticide is practiced, because having a girl was viewed as an economic burden of paying dowry to the groom's family, which was and in some places still is a prerequisite for marriage. Though it may be masked with a different word than dowry, like tradition. So many girl fetuses were aborted that the Indian government made it illegal to find out if a pregnant mother was carrying a boy child or girl child in 1996 (News18, 2020). So that meant that when a pregnant woman came into the ultrasound clinic for her prenatal screening, the clinic was mandated to keep extensive records of the visit, which was then shared with local health organizations. But during the 2020 global pandemic, the Indian Health Ministry (News18, 2020), decided on April 4th 2020, that ultrasound clinics no longer needed to keep detailed records of prenatal visits, and that this would be an effective June 30th 2020, almost three months. Adding to the increased rates of domestic violence against women worldwide during COVID-19, activists were worried that this three month gap would increase female feticide abortions, since clinic owners were not required to keep records of prenatal visits. Why suspend the rule in the first place? They said it was to save time and to increase patient processing. In 2018, (News18, 2020) it was estimated that 63 million women in India were statistically missing, while 21 million girls were

considered unwanted. Between the years of 2000 and 2005, 239,000 girls under the age of five died because of gender based neglect. I want to introduce you to Rekha. When I asked her why she thought that boys were preferred over girls, she had some really interesting things to say.

Rekha 33:03

But I think that stems from history and from what's passed down through generations, I don't think that's like a mindset that people are born with. Like, I feel like in the past, people were like, it'll cost more to have a girl because I have to pay her dowry. And these are mindsets that are carried through generations. But I think, by asking the questions that you're asking, that's how we prevent that from being carried forward in the future. Because the reason why I say that hasn't been my experience is because my parents have two daughters, right. And while I do know that a lot of other parents are like, hey, like, you have to get married and stuff. My parents are like, you don't have to get married if you don't want to. And their biggest thing was, we want you to be able to take care of yourself. It's not only Indian society that views women as inferior, that's every society within this world, right? So I don't think we could just blame that on Desi culture. Whereas I think it's like a global issue with like, the subordination of women and also just like, we haven't fostered a global community for women to be able to succeed in every society yet. And I think until it's like a global, globally accepted problem. I don't think anything will really change. You know what I mean?

(guitar heavy music begins)

Grishma 34:22

I totally get what you mean Rekha. At first I thought the grandmother was the villain in Dev's cousin's story. Then I wondered about what kind of life grandmother had and what grandmother had seen in her childhood. As Dev said, when you lose importance to something, it stops affecting you. Maybe the grandmother, so many girls die in her time? And to survive, she conditioned her mind to equate daughter as stone. Stone does not have feelings. Let's not forget the fact that grandmother was once a mother, a wife, a sister, and a daughter. And oftentimes, we hear and learn things in childhood and it influences how we think and how we treat people in our adult life. We want to be against the sin, not against the sinner, right?

(Guitar heavy music ends)

And India is less than a hundred years old. The same goes for Pakistan. Compared to the United States, which is 244 years old as of April 2021. And it wasn't until 1920

(Waxman, 2020), that women got the right to vote in the United States. According to Time Magazine, black women had to wait almost 50 more years to exercise their right to vote. Even in 2021 women in America don't meet as much as their male counterparts (Sheth, 2021). The pay gap is not only skewed by gender, it's also skewed by race. Rekha was wise to point out that the subordination of women happens everywhere. And until we do better, how will it get better? For our daughters, sisters, mothers, spouses, arts, godmothers? I could keep going, but I think you get my point. I'll leave you with that question. As we conclude our episode on gender.

(Suspenseful music begins and fades out)

End of Gender Transcript

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