

India Ink



Notes on the World's Largest Democracy

November 12, 2012, 1:21 am | 4 Comments

From India, a 'Lad Mag' That's the Opposite of Macho

By JEN SWANSON

This Diwali, while boys set off firecrackers and aunties light diyas and lanterns, Harish Sadani, looking rumpled as would any editor/publisher nearing a deadline, finally finds himself able to breathe. That's because Mr. Sadani, who runs a nongovernmental organization in Mumbai known as MAVA (Men Against Violence & Abuse), has just printed off the final pages of Purush Spandana, an annual magazine, or ank, printed especially for Diwali.



MAVAIndia Web site

The cover of the Diwali edition of Purush Spandana, a Marathi language magazine.

The Maharashtrian tradition of giving anks at Diwali, a major gift-giving holiday, goes back just over a century. But of the estimated 400 anks printed each fall, only Purush Spandana, which translates roughly to "Male Vibrations," speaks directly to men, although not through scantily clad cover models, a distinction that sets it apart from other anks in the shop.

The goal of the periodical, a collection of articles, short stories and poems penned in Marathi by Indian authors from around the state, is to get people to think. "We wanted to create a safe, nonthreatening space to address issues of masculinity in a contemporary context," said Mr. Sadani. "Now readers can read a story about a man who has overcome patriarchy in his own life, and ask himself, 'If he can question his outlook, why not me?'"

About 35 to 40 percent of Purush Spandana will be purchased by women, who hope that by casually leaving a copy around the house, their husbands, fathers-in-law or sons may give it a glance. (This year's 192-page edition will be available for 90 rupees (\$1.65) in Maharashtrian bookstores through December.)

Now in its 17th year, the magazine will explore in its latest edition the concept of family, as well as male-female relationships, a theme intended to encourage readers to "move past the stereotypical thing, beyond blood, kinship and wealth," as Mr. Sadani puts it, and "to consider family in a new way." Inside, an engineer writes of finding a brotherly connection with a fellow orphan and outcast, who later turns out to be a gigolo. Another man describes his role as one half of a DINK, or "Double Income No Kids" family, an increasingly common family unit in 21st century India.

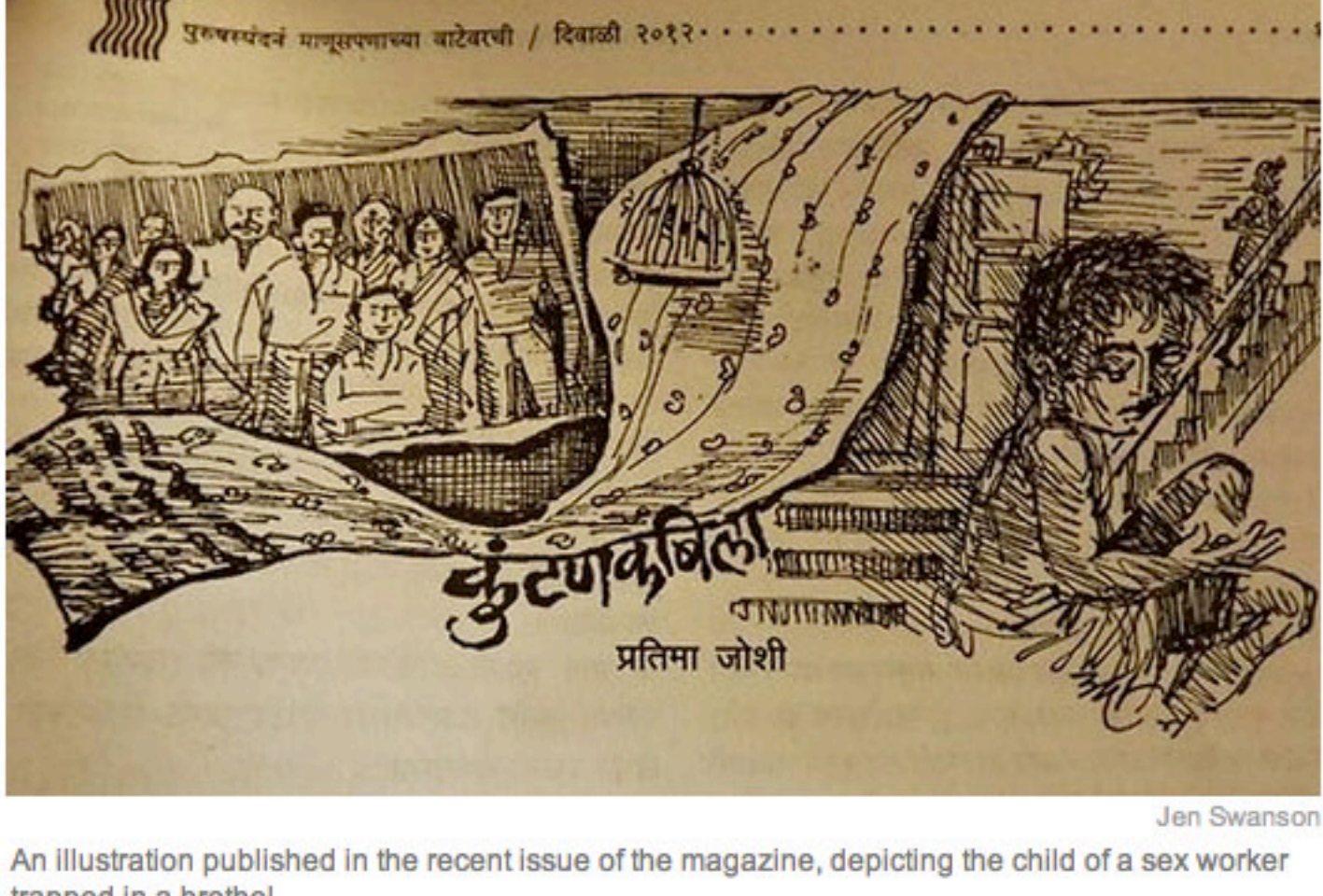


Jen Swanson

Harish Sadani, the editor of Purush Spandana, a Marathi language magazine, holding the latest edition, published for Diwali.

An elderly woman, unwanted by her father, recalls being rescued as an infant by her grandfather; now with two grown sons living in the United States, she compares the relationships with all the different men in her life. In Mumbai's red-light district, a journalist recalls a lonely child playing with a one-rupee coin while his mother entertains clients upstairs; a different writer reports on the ambiguity of familial relationships in India's transgender community, outcasts typically dismissed from the accepted family system.

"Family is a relationship, but doesn't have to take place in the traditional sense," said Ravindra Rukmini Pandharinath, co-editor of Purush Spandana, explaining that this year's theme was about finding ways to humanize the family system, making space for groups like sex workers and prostitutes that are usually excluded. "Everyone needs some sort of emotional support," he said. "Can't family from different castes come together? Can't family go beyond property?"



Jen Swanson

An illustration published in the recent issue of the magazine, depicting the child of a sex worker trapped in a brothel.

Past issues have explored the intricacies of friendship and caste; last year's ank examined sexuality, with the image of a half-male, half-female deity dancing on the cover – "like a yin and yang, since everyone shares masculine and feminine traits," explained Mr. Sadani.

That same year, female writers were invited to contribute for the first time. "Sexuality being a core topic that touches everyone, it was important to see what women think," Mr. Sadani recalled, noting that the female authors, who come from a diversity of professional fields and backgrounds, as do the male contributors, have added a valuable perspective over the past two years.

Next year's theme is up in the air, but Mr. Sadani said he hoped to explore religion and governance in future issues, specifically the restrictions they impose on women.

This year's issue has achieved another critical checkpoint, as it is the first year Mr. Sadani has been able to cover production costs and pay all the writers without dipping into his own pockets, thanks to the support of high-profile advertisers like GSK, the Aditya Birla Group, HDFC, Tata, IDBI and Bank of Baroda. Mr. Sadani spends six months every year on the magazine, editing, pitching advertisers and printing around 1,500 copies for distribution. From 1996-2006, the magazine was co-produced in partnership with Purush Uvach, or "Men Speak," a Pune-based men's group that helped shoulder the brunt of production.

In 2007, MAVA and Purush Uvach also published selected excerpts of Purush Spandana into an English book, a collection titled "Breaking the Moulds." Three years later, the pair brought out a second collection in Marathi, called "Prashna Purushbhanache," which translates roughly to "Issues of Male Consciousness."

Meanwhile, the ank earns steady praise from local literary bodies, usually winning one or two awards each year for content, editing or the uniqueness of the concept itself, all while building on the state's long legacy of progressive literature and social reform. This year, Mr. Sadani said he hoped Purush Spandana might also win an award for its cover, a freehand drawing of an unconventional family (in this case, baby birds in a nest) against a much larger world, where family comes and goes but always comes home, inspired by the bright colors of the rainbow, the symbol of gay pride.

"Maharashtra has a long history of social reformers and leaders who have fought for women's equality," said Mr. Pandharinath. "Not because they were looking at women as objects of sympathy, but because they called it a human rights issue," he said, referring to well-known Maharashtrian reformers like Jyotiba Phule, a pioneer for women's education who opened India's first school for girls in 1848, and B.R. Ambedkar, who fought for women's right to vote.

Thus, MAVA may be India's first official "men's group," but it's also just the latest band of Maharashtrian men who have fought, alongside women, for gender equality, chipping away at the vast patriarchy that affects every member of Indian society.

Thus, MAVA may be India's first official "men's group," but it's also just the latest band of Maharashtrian men who have fought, alongside women, for gender equality, chipping away at the vast patriarchy that affects every member of Indian society.

"Emancipation isn't just a women's issue," said Mr. Pandharinath. Patriarchy also oppresses men by making them unable to discuss their feelings without feeling unmanly or weak, he said.

"Women are very open and can discuss these matters, but men don't have the vocabulary," he said. "They just don't know how to talk about these issues. This is about giving men a voice, helping them to speak. We wanted to create a space for men to talk in an open manner."