

Stories of hope and emancipation

A recent event that aimed to address the various facets in the gender inequality discourse, made its point quite well, writes trisha bhattacharya

The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself
— Virginia Woolf

GIVEN our welcome shift in attitude when it comes to talking about gender inequalities these days, one would have imagined a lot more being done to address the same. Unfortunately, that's hardly the case. RNB The eProject, however, aimed to illustrate the myriad shades of gender and its identities recently through a unique mix of arts with some untold stories of emancipation and empowerment thrown in for good measure. In a world full of people who are ready to shower one with pellets of "well-meaning" advice on life, one is taught from a young age that a particular gender is dependent on the other for its survival. Yet such demarcations are not limited to gender alone— anybody who is not fair, straight or from an upper class family has to deal with some form of oppression on a daily basis. The beauty in a situation so bleak is that from such ashes of tyranny rise stories of courage and hope.

As India grapples with questions over the Indian Penal Code's anachronistic Section 377, Dabalina Majumdar, a young filmmaker, has come up with a short film based on a true story named Teen Shotti (Three Truths) in which a couple has been showcased raising an eight-year-old boy. But the crux of the story is both parents belong to the same sex — Aatreyee Basu and Sanghamitra Mitra and their son Tunai is from Mitra's first husband. It portrays the hardships they had to endure in order to live together. On asking Majumdar to showcase her movies on homonormativity through a "big" production house, the filmmaker answered, "No halls will be given for screening the movies, let alone a big production house." She would have you know that her movies have broken the mainstream structure of man-woman love and Poushali Basak, a queer activist, confirms that.

On the other hand, one may think that sex reassignment surgery could be of help, but it is also about loving one's body. Prabhat, an ex-footballer and a "trans-man" who thinks he is a man from within, said, "It is all about how you see yourself. There is no need for scissors

or scalpels."

At a time when India is trying to reconcile itself between the past and fast-changing times, the duality of its, frankly, hypocritical society is ever more compelling to comprehend. One would do well to keep the example of sex-worker-turned-poet-and-civil-rights-activist Maya Angelou in mind. Her life went from enduring sexual violence to writing the cult autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

At the event, the series of performances staged by some very renowned artists were juxtaposed with interviews that portrayed some untold stories featuring women who have emerged as beacons of hope amid the continuous darkness of despair. Baithali Ganguly has been fighting a battle against human trafficking for two decades now through an NGO named Jabala. It shelters victims of trafficking and rehabilitates them. What are her feelings when her story of struggle is celebrated? She said, "I don't

not always on the opposite side of the "us versus them" divide. It is on such strong foundations that memories of shared struggles become agents of change for society at large. As poetess Pranati Tagore says, "We talk about emancipation but are we honest about ourselves? Men are not the only enemy of feminism but women, too." In this regard, Rabindranath Tagore's *Suorani ar Duorani* was quite aptly voiced by Sohini Sengupta.

In the quagmire that constitutes gender issues in India, there's another law that needs to be highlighted — the Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Act, 498 (a). Supranav Dash featured the journeys of some men who have fallen prey to the inherent loopholes in the law. There are husbands like Pratik Ganguly, a businessman, who married his childhood sweetheart. When some years later he found his wife involved in an affair with his business partner, he was slapped with section 498(a) after filing a divorce. Same went for Kishalay Chakraborty who



Sohini Sengupta and Swatilehka Sengupta drive the point home.

want all this. If as a result of these events people give some money for my girls, then it would be any use, otherwise it's a complete waste of time."

Swarna Chitrakar, a patua, (scroll painters of a traditional art form called Patachitra from West Bengal) struggled to revive her art form, which dominated her identity. During her voyage, her husband was her most loyal companion. When she was fighting for her existence by making art, he was one who raised their children and looked after the household. Therefore, when one discusses women's empowerment, a contrary view to stereotypical notions of men always suppressing women has to be included as part of the wider discourse. Men are

married a wealthy doctor but was cheated on. But he was dragged to court with 498(a) after a plea of separation and was in jail for 40 days. Chakraborty's father, the only family he had, died after as he was unable to withstand that shock.

All facts considered one feels empowerment must come from all sectors of society. The stories worthy of celebration should talk about kindred individuals and their saga. It is high time that their songs are heard — songs that talk about the experiences of growth and evolution as people embraced their true selves to make a difference in their own and the lives of those around them.