

The known gender/ gender segregation in Skanda Vale

My time in Skanda Vale started by the approach of Andy one of the monks, now it seemed that from early on in my visit and experience at Skanda vale I could already see a clear gender divide amongst the residents. The men where the first contact we had, and continued to be the majority of the contact we had whilst spending time in the community. This is a major factor to why I decided to discuss gender with in this report. As someone who is interested in gender roles and how we still seem to have such an issue when it comes to accepting the importance to everyone being equal, even with some improvements there is still a long way to go.

Brief on Skanda vale

Skanda vale is a multi-faith ashram – home resident community of 25 monks and nuns. The monks and nuns are unmarried renunciants (sannyasin), dedicating their lives to loving and serving the divine through karma yoga and bhakti yoga. The monks and nuns take the Franciscan vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Skanda vale was found in wales by guru Sri Subramaniam in 1973. Before Skanda Vale became a place of worship for many monks, nuns and pilgrims the guru used to have meetings at his flat in Earls Court London, where devotees would spend their time. The guru taught the people of Skanda Vale that there is many religions but only one god, all life emits from and merges into, an underlying principle of non-dual timeless consciousness expressing itself throughout creation in a myriad of different names and forms.

Skanda Vale ashram has three temples situated amongst the beautiful community along with their temples they have also made their own hospice not so far from Skanda Vale a really wonderful caring community to be doing all they do for the people around them.

Three of the vows they follow in Skanda Vale are poverty, Chastity and obedience.

definition of gender difference

"patriarchy is deeply embedded in the sexual division of labour (although effected by other influences too); women find themselves more or less universally charged with responsibility for childcare and domestic work" (Press, 1994) Page 2.

The press make a clear point here about how we assume a woman's role to be domestic and maternal leaving the men to provide for their family assuming that it's the main importance to a woman whilst the male does all the heavy hard work that it seems women are assumed to not be able to do. Women are still highly oppressed in our society even with on going movements to change the way we see gender roles there is still a clear that there is still a lot of this still happening possibly even subconsciously without realising that a woman is just as powerful and important than any other.

Skanda vale's gender separation

It is clear to me that before even heading to Skanda Vale I already had an idea that the male role would show more importance than female. This is due to the fact that I still strongly believe and automatically assume that most places like this would be this way, not that I should ever assume but due to doing so anyway, I went with the idea of investigating this. Making it easier to look at every

small detail to really figure out if there was anything that would highlight a difference between male and female.

From the very start, there was a divide between both male and female, Brother Andy took us on the first tour showing us some amazing landmarks from Skanda Vale including the one of their Guru, a memorial dedicated to him after his passing. It is clear that the guru had a strong impact on the way in which the gender divide works in Skanda Vale and from some conversations seems is the reason there is still such views as they have not changed anything since the passing of the Guru who is such an importance to them. Reason being the whole of Skanda Vale see each other as a family unit, so when the guru passed they felt the need to continue his morals.

Before any of us females even entered our first pooja to the Sri Ranganatha temple we were informed that if we are menstruating that we could only watch the prey from outside of the pooja on a screen. I understand that this is just a cultural practice but it made me feel as if for what our bodies do it is considered dirty to be going through the natural process that is the most important start to human life, just seemed as if it was not acceptable to be anywhere near a sacred place to them whilst going through this process.

The Sri Ranganatha Temple had both monks and nuns input throughout the service, so no clear gender divide up until the end of the pooja where it always seems the monks would be the ones providing the camphor, and vibhuti. The woman were also informed to stay where they were before leaving the worship whilst the males left first and females followed behind, again left another indication to me that the male role was more important and that females just followed making them less important.

Through out our Skanda Vale experience it seemed to me that even down to conversating with a nun was pretty much impossible, every last bit of information given to us was by the brothers of the community. Where was the female voice? How can we really understand what its like to be in such a community without hearing the voices of both genders. There was never much nuns around, the majority of them spent their time working in the hospice caring for the sick, whilst it seemed the men did the manual work again a massive worrying factor of gender roles.

On the discussion of work, I challenged the system we all got asked to do some labour in return for our stay the choices were between painting some fences and lifting heavy food donations that had been provided to the community. It was assumed that as a female I would of course go for the painting, as it was the easier option. Approaching one of the monks I asked him where it was I needed to be to work (without stating what it was) he automatically pointed me towards the painting, I stopped him in his tracks and told him that in fact it was the heavy lifting I was looking to be doing to help, without second thought he asked me if I was sure (already doubting by capability to do the heavy lifting)

From everything that happened with in Skanda vale there just never seemed to be a female in charge of anything, there was always the male presence and it was a strong one, you could always feel the power of the monks almost like they acted as the full foundation to Skanda Vale. Without assuming I sort of felt as if the females where silenced they didn't seem to have much say in anything. Even though as a group we only spent just over a day with the community even in that sort period of time it seemed to be such a stereo typical set up.

Student feedback

I took it upon myself to interview my fellow students about their thoughts on the gender divide with in Skanda Vale and if they noticed any particular differences between both male and female within the community/themselves.

Person	Response	Divide/ No Divide/ No effect
April	Yeah I would say I felt like a second class citizen in comparison to the men thought we stepped back in time.	Divide
Rebecca	I didn't necessarily feel less important, I'd just say that it felt like men were the priority when it comes to religion but I also feel like that maybe reflects modern life too so I didn't necessarily feel that it was Skanda Vale specifically that had that kind of effect on me	No effect
Sam	Nothing in particular struck out to me really? Aside from the obvious sitting apart during pujas and the period related situation of having to sit on the terrace if you were on your period	No divide
Bori	I definitely felt excluded. Especially the first day, the very first puja in the Maha Shakti temple. I was on my periods for the whole week so it really wasn't fun. I'd say that slowly I started not to care. But at the beginning it made me feel angry. Also because there were two mums outside who were taking care of the children while the farhers were praying...I just couldn't stop thinking that it's unfair and started thinking about religions and how they are actually all the same, all promoting patriarchy in a way or another...and then I just got into this loop of angry and sad thoughts	Divide
Thom	Well I didn't like the fact that men and women had to sit separately and sleep separately and all that jazz. But it was more equal than I expected to be honest	
Kal	it felt ok. I didn't feel too ... taboo as such. Until a long term male pilgrim marched in. late. and strolled past everybody. didn't take a place at the back or avoid disturbing everybody. just strolled up to take his "rightful" place at the front. and then ... in that moment I felt resentful. and thought "there goes male privilege	divide
Cara	I didn't feel any different to be honest. I mean sometimes the difference in treatment was clear, but that's nothing more than I'd expect. It's jut something I accepted and moved on from.	No effect
Cameron	yes....men were served first in the temple with the camphor (flame) and vibhuti (powder)...of course only men can be priests	divide

"There were two mums outside taking care of the children whilst the fathers were praying, this made me feel angry a thought I couldn't shift the whole time I was there" Bori

If religion was important to everyone, then why did it seem that it was more important for the males to be within the temple over the females looking after their children, shouldn't it be equal for both male and female to get the chance to be within the temple it just seems both mothers where expected to do their role as "mother"

"yes... men were served first in the temple with the camphor (flame) and Vibhuti (powder) ... of course only men can be priests" Cameron

Here another example of male privilege, it just seems that through everything the female seems to always be in the shadow of a male.

Conclusion

I found it unfair to totally go on my own judgment here, but after talking to my group it seems that there was more people than just me effected by the gender divide within Skanda Vale. By collecting data from both the males and females it seems I had a lot of mixed answers which will be in my graph above, even though the majority of my class didn't feel necessarily effected by the divide they could sense a difference, whether that be a big difference or small everyone I asked felt something. Only being there for 24 hours may not have helped with feeling any extreme divide, but I couldn't help but think about the nuns who live there all year around we cannot assume it bothers them, but we can most certainly see that male privilege is all around Skanda Vale. I cannot judge on a community that I do not live upon and it would be unfair of me to be personally insulted by the way they live, it just seemed that being in the community was like going back in time, I loved what they stood for when it came to living off donations, without technology (to an extent) as it felt free, peaceful but personally I just wish I saw a lot more of the woman's input there. Who am I to tell others how to live though? This is their culture and I guess even though it felt uncomfortable to watch sometimes this is theirs (if needs be) not ours.

Refrence

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