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## **Sexuality in Modern India: Critical Concerns**

*Mary E John and Janaki Nair*

While sexuality and issues relating to it have come up periodically in the past, it is only now, with the growing feminist concern with the rights of women to their lives and bodies, that sexuality has gained a more enduring prominence.

Questions of sexuality have been raised during a number of critical periods in modern India and clearly predate explicit feminist concern. To the extent that sexuality has today gained a more enduring prominence as a subject of political movements or academic discourse, however, it is as a result of growing feminist involvement with the rights of women to their lives and bodies. For too long, it was not women's sexual experiences that were at stake, but the elaborate codes of honour that were/ are inscribed on female bodies. Women bear the marks, sometimes, violent marks, of caste, ethnic and national imaginations. Not only have middle-class, upper caste women been the ground on which questions of modernity and tradition are framed, they are the embodiment of the boundaries between licit and illicit forms of sexuality, as well as the guardians of the morality of the nation.

But women are also 'reproductive beings'. It was, we well know, the dangerous sexuality of the non-mother that motivated the, social reform legislation of the 19th century. It was, and continues to be, the irresponsible promiscuities of the poor which prompted national programmes for the control of a growing population; if these programmes have evolved considerably from the excesses of the forced sterilization programmes on men associated with Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency, it is by affixing reproductive responsibility, but not sexual desire, solely on women. And today, it is the menacing sexuality of the commercial sex worker as a potential bearer of AIDS that has heightened concern for and engendered campaigns about 'safe sex'. Here too, safe sex has primarily been promoted through the aggressive sale of condoms, as a way of protecting (unavoidable) male promiscuity, in an ironic departure from monogamy as an ideal.

Meanwhile, imagined fears and fantasies about the sexual appetites of different women haunt the cultural imagination. For this, resources are always close at hand, at least within the Hindu tradition: One of the presiding metaphors of Hindu myths is, after all, the demonic 'vagina dentata', exemplified by the lolling, threatening tongue (phallus) of Kali. Perhaps because Hindu metaphors and icons of an active female sexual power have enjoyed considerable if not enduring influence, to the point of being used to prove the irrelevance of a women's movement in our context, feminism in India has overwhelmingly highlighted women as victims.

Women have been the victims of patriarchal sexual practices, whether through the exploitation of landlords, during caste atrocities, in marital rape, in state policies concerning reproduction, or as bearers of the violent marks of political change and transformation. Only more recently have spaces opened up for talking of female desire, or of alternate sexualities. As a consequence, the Indian women's movement, to the extent that it specifically foregrounds sexuality, has usually concentrated on the question of enforcing laws that would act as a restraint on long sanctioned male privileges over the bodies and lives of women, and this too, primarily as they affect poor or working class women. One of the most recent successes of the movement is the Supreme Court directive announced in August 1997 which makes the sexual harassment of women at the work-place a punishable offence.

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The other major context within the women's movement to have seen discussions of sexuality is that of women's health. Health workshops have been repeatedly stymied by 'textbook' assumptions and discussions of topics such as fertility or menstruation, which often diverge radically from most women's own experiences. Though many Indian feminists may have found the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, produced by the Boston Health Collective, as too 'obsessed with the intricacies of sexual intercourse and with bodily consciousness in general', it is equally true that it has served as an inspiration for feminist health books in a number of regional languages. In recent years, the movement has shown itself more willing to address women's tastes and desires (if largely within the middle classes), often as a way of outlining the possibility of political opposition to the agencies of globalization, which seek to aggressively 'modernize' Indian society while keeping democracy at bay.

## Male sexuality

Paradoxically, yet predictably, questions of male sexuality have rarely been a focus of scholarly analysis, except as in celebrated instances of celibacy. Celibacy has been long valorised as a cultural ideal for men, especially among Hindus, and was usually advocated as a phase in the life cycle, a temporary abstention that conserves life-giving fluid (semen) for superior physical and political tasks. Despite a general acknowledgement of male sexual need, even promiscuity, male celibacy has thus been valorised as an indisputable (upper caste) ideal.

Celibacy received a fresh lease of life with Vivekananda's call for sexual abstinence for building a nation of heroes, one which anticipated in many ways the more publicized embrace of celibacy by Gandhi. But if Gandhi's step to take up brahmacarya and become a 'eunuch for the nation' is considerably more well known than the efforts of others before and after him, the reasons are not far to seek. For it would be difficult to find a more obsessive concern with male genital sex as a 'problem' in the fully Foucauldian sense of the term: Its very repudiation demanded that sexual desire be talked about endlessly and confessed to at the slightest sign of its arousal, displaced onto other practices, food habits and relationships, and vigorously policed in everyday life.

One can fully empathise with the difficulties that beset the analysis of a man who is 'the foremost culture-hero of modern India'; moreover, from a feminist perspective, we cannot remain unaffected by Gandhi's repeated emphasis on the violence which constitutes such a ready ingredient of male sexual desire, one which men can and must transform.

More detailed discussion of the implications of Gandhi's attitude towards sexuality is beyond the scope of this brief account, particularly in terms of understanding his special political concern for two groups of people - women and untouchables. In the context of his own life, it appears that women shifted from being the recipients of his projections, fantasies and sexual needs to being required as proof of his successes in the cause of celibacy, since they were capable of inciting male lust even when desire was absent. From the perspective of Gandhi's stance on issues of caste, it seems not just patronising but in some way offensive that self-mortification for a 'sexual lapse' in later life should have taken the form of leaving the 'luxury' of his ashram to live in a 'remote and poverty-stricken, untouchable village'. Not only does this seem to suggest a shared revulsion, it places Gandhi's preoccupations with himself at the centre of the entire exercise.

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At the same time, Gandhi's unflinching call for the reform of male sexuality and his use of the figure of the celibate woman, often the Hindu widow, as an ideal to be emulated rather than contained, also inspired early feminists to campaign against 'double standards'. This has gradually been fashioned into the legal ideal of monogamy, rearticulated today in demands for gender just codes. However, it is not virginity that is upheld as an ideal for women so much as the notion of the chaste wife, an empowered figure in (Hindu) myth who functions as a means of taming or domesticating the more fearful aspects of the woman's sexual appetite. It is only of late that feminists have begun envisaging and articulating ways of dismantling patriarchal privileges without necessarily limiting the rights or freedoms of women themselves through self-imposed codes of asexuality. The enforced norm of celibacy both within and outside marriage for women within religious orders, recent research has revealed, holds ambiguous possibilities for women, enabling some women, to refuse marriage altogether or at least to redefine its terms.

Although there are some discussions today on male sexuality as a sign of masculine virility, (rather than on the links between celibacy and power), the strongest suggestion of the sexual anxieties undergirding contemporary political movements are palpable in Anand Patwardhan's film *Father, Son and Holy War*.

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Indeed, if Gandhian nationalism deployed the metaphors of celibacy as a (male) ideal, the contemporary phase of the movement of the Hindu Right is marked by complex negotiations of the powers of masculine virility, drawing as much from Vivekananda as from Gandhi, and expressing both envy and fear of the imagined sexual abilities of the (demonised) Indian Muslim.

### **Sexuality in political movements**

If the nationalist movement in the past, as today, made attempts to harness sexual energies to the tasks of nation building, what of other political movements in modern India? What were the prohibitions, taboos, or ideas about sexual

desire that animated movements for more total and democratic transformation, such as the left movement, or the Non-Brahmin movement? The interface between official Marxism and feminism has been a troubled one indeed in the Indian context, even though Indian feminism in the post-1970s was grounded in Marxism. For its part, the left movement enabled a greater visibility for women in all spheres of political activity, including armed struggle. Yet the celebrated narratives of women in the Telangana movement show that male cadres had no hesitation in sending women out of the party on the mere suspicion of 'immorality'.

Here, as in other social movements, there was little attempt to rethink sexual relationships, so that male and usually upper caste transgressions were more readily tolerated, while women functioned under the terrible burden of upholding the moral order even in conditions of guerrilla warfare. Today, there is a more productive dialogue between the women within the radical left movement and progressive Telugu writers such as Chalam, who in the Andhra context, have inspired women to challenge structures of authority through both political activity and theoretical critique. However, a recent attack on feminist poetry in Telugu for being allegedly pornographic or 'blue', launched by literary critics including those on the left would indicate that questions regarding the appropriate subject-matter of women's writing remain unresolved and controversial.

A radical rethinking of the relations between men and women, was also a feature of the Non-Brahmin movement. A leader of such iconic stature as E V Ramaswami Naicker (Periyar) was able to mark a distinct shift in the terms of the debate on contraception. What distinctive features of the politics of sexuality are rendered visible by its location within an anticasteist frame, unlike the writings of Chalam or those inspired by him, where such issues remain largely occluded?

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One of the significant practices to emerge out of the Self-Respect Movement was the Self-Respect marriage, a social contract animated by a vision of chosen reciprocity, based on mutual desire and, especially, on reason. The interventions of Gandhi Chalam and Periyar also give us cause to pause, and to ask: what were the conditions of possibility of a female figure, whether as political activist or as writer, being able to command the kind of authority that these men have enjoyed

in reenvisioning fundamental social relationships and actively retailing them? Would a feminist reimagining be recognisably different?

### **Alternate Sexualities**

Perhaps because of all the uncertainties affecting approaches towards the subject of 'sex' - whether within social movements or as a field of investigation, the dominant and exclusionary structures of heterosexuality (as distinct from patriarchy or gender) have rarely been a focus of explicit critique.

As in other parts of the world, India has seen a growing lesbian and gay movement, one which has also come to receive its share of media attention. In early 1988, when two policewomen in Madhya Pradesh decided to get married, the news was picked up by the press and perhaps because of all the uncertainties affecting approaches towards the subject of 'sex', the dominant and exclusionary structures of heterosexuality, have rarely been a focus of explicit critique created something of a furore. This was perhaps the first occasion when lesbianism became a matter of widespread public debate, and, in such a way, that the issue could not so easily be dismissed as yet another Western aberration. As a political event, however, it also raised troubling questions for the women's movement and for a fledgling gay and lesbian politics, whose relationship to each other was far from clear. An important article highlighted the 'elaborate apparatus of explication' evident in most reports of the marriage, which explained away the decision of the two-women in terms of their suffering and victimhood at the hands of a patriarchal society, never allowing for the possibility of an affirmative, let alone sexual relationship.

Over the last decade, the gay and lesbian movement has grown in visibility, with a mushrooming of groups and publications in India, and among South Asians in the West. Legal activism has extended from ongoing efforts to change the discriminatory legislation embodied in the anti-sodomy laws, to proposals to amend the Special Marriages Act to permit same-sex marriages. In a recent overview, Sherry Joseph has tried to plot the emergence of the identity politics of the gay and lesbian movement in its relations with similar movements in the West, as well as the specific dilemmas faced by lesbians within a movement that is male-dominated.

Feminists such as Flavia Agnes are among the spokespersons of the women's movement who have gone on record to claim that 'lesbianism is an integral part of the women's movement for liberation. It constitutes an important area of their

struggle against the exploitative principles and institutions of patriarchy.' Hostility, if not homophobia, however, are not uncommon, as was witnessed when the Vice-President of the National Federation of Indian Women appealed to the Prime Minister in 1994 to cancel permission to host a South Asian Gay Conference in Mumbai. In a widely circulated and endorsed letter of protest against the Vice-President's demand, the women's organisation Jagori stated that it was particularly disturbing that someone who had worked so actively in the women's movement should make virulent and uninformed public statements against homosexuality, notwithstanding the possible class and gender biases of the conference organisers.

### **A breed apart**

For its part, the media has revealed its changeling role in the business of representing gay and lesbian issues. The 1990s have seen a spate of newspaper and magazine articles that, on the face of it, seem to be taking lesbian identities and sexual choices seriously. A second look, however, would reveal that these pieces have managed to evade being homophobic by exoticising and essentialising their theme;

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however sympathetic the portrayal, lesbians become a breed apart. With films like Daaera, Tamanna and Fire, gay themes and relationships have entered the portals of respectable art cinema. In the film Bombay, a hijra provides protection to one of the twin sons of the Hindu hero and Muslim heroine during the communal riots, and becomes the mouthpiece for the impossibility of identity. But in other box office hits such as Hum Aap Ke Hai Kaun, Giti Thadani has pointed out that whereas the hero is able to cross-dress and successfully access the women-only space that precedes the wedding, a 'butch-looking woman' is denied entry, and humiliated by the transvestite male.

### **The third gender**

As debates within and across gay and lesbian organisations, the women's movement and a broader public gradually gain ground, scholarly initiatives are also in evidence. A longstanding theme to have exercised scholars both at home and abroad concerns the status of the hijras. In Serena Nanda's ethnographic

study of this community, hijras are homosexual men who take on a female persona, living apart from mainstream society under the leadership of a guru, while remaining economically dependent as traditional performers, sex-workers or by receiving alms. In spite of all the evidence of their marginality, Nanda believes that, since 'Hinduism ... has always been more able to accommodate gender variation, ambiguity and contradictions' (in contrast to the West), hijras in effect have a place in Indian society as a viable and recognised 'third gender'. Others have had reason to dispute this view of our great and ancient 'tolerance'.

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In part, perhaps, because of unflinching accusations that gay and lesbian sexualities could only be Western imports, history has become a crucial site for retrieving an erased past. Ancient texts, medieval court customs, epics and Tantric rituals have been investigated for their representations and descriptions of homosexual acts and relationships. However, difficult questions of methodology also crowd in, since the interpretative frameworks adopted cannot but be modern ones. Thus, for instance, Citi Thadani's important study of lesbian sexuality constructs a narrative of ancient 'autonomous gynefocal cosmological traditions' centred in lesbian relations, which were disrupted by the advent of Islam and British colonialism, and lost as Hinduism became more monolithic and heterosexual. Such grand historical accounts run into genuine dangers, however unintended, in a field underdetermined by evidence and severely overdetermined by current agendas, including those of the Hindu Right. But this is not to suggest that the archives of history - ancient, medieval and modern - should therefore be relinquished.

It is not enough to provide an account of 'alternate sexualities' that closes with a readiness to acknowledge the Indianness of gays and lesbians. (Sometimes this 'Indianness' is posed in terms of justifying the absence of a more strongly demarcated public identity politics compared to the West). As Nivedita Menon has argued, 'to consider homosexuality as an "alternative" lifestyle is to leave unquestioned heterosexuality as a norm.' Rather than endeavour to make room for more and more sexual identities, Menon wonders whether simply expanding the domain of the natural is a sufficient strategy for destabilising the dominant sexual order. What would be required to denaturalise, then, the sedimented structures of our bodies and desires, such that the taken-for-granted aspects of our sexual economies are no longer left intact?