

## Sexuality, Nation, Community and Women

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(Based on presentation made at PRISM panel at WSF, Mumbai January 2004)

Let me start with what we all know. Both the modern 'Nation' and the modern (ethnic/religion based) 'Community' need Women (a category of people designated as women), and the bodies of women, to construct their own identity as natural and eternal. Every nation and community claims to have existed forever, and every nation and community marks itself on and through the bodies of women – Hindu women wear *bindis*, Muslim women wear veils, Indian women do not wear jeans...

Nation and community need Men too – they wear turbans or fez caps, they die and kill in battle. But signs of masculinity represent valour and pride; signs of femininity represent meekness and humility. When women obey the rules of the community and of the nation, they are rewarded with the knowledge that their obedience protects the honour of their fathers, husbands and sons. When men obey the rules of the community and nation, they are rewarded with honour for themselves, and with power over the vanquished, over the women of the vanquished, and over their own women. Community rapes, ethnic rapes, caste rapes, are a message *men* send to *men*. The raped women are not agents of course, but as feminists have pointed out often enough, they are barely even the objects of the rape – they are merely the vehicles carrying a message to the men of their community.

From this point I want to take the discussion towards three inter-related issues that the women's movement and feminist thought in India have not taken seriously enough, or far enough.

First - can feminists be nationalist? Our response in India, to the charge that feminism is "western", has been too often in nationalist terms. But really, feminism has no alternative but to adopt a post-nationalist stance – the nation-state can only ever be oppressive in the construction of identity. This is very obvious in the case of xenophobic and exclusive nationalisms like Hindutva and Nazi ideology, but even the *secular* project of "nation-

building” involves the homogenizing of identity, through for instance, producing something called a national language and a national culture. It involves the overwhelming power of the “national interest”, which pronounces as “anti-national” any voice that questions the commonality of that interest – the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the anti-Hindi agitation in southern states, and of course, irredeemably, the Muslim.

The post-nationalism I urge is neither the post-nationalism of corporate globalization (from above), and nor is it the post-nationalism of large international NGOs trying to establish “global civil society” with values and codes presented as universal, but which have in fact been produced by the particular history and culture of western civilization. Rather, the post-nationalism that feminists must adopt must be both *below* the level of the nation and *across* national borders – the solidarities of political movements of women, LGBT identities, migrant workers. Such movements have existed before of course, but in this post-nationalist era, we will have to live with heterogeneity and continually negotiate, not attempt to eliminate, difference *within* ourselves.

Second – why have we not launched an uncompromising critique of the family? The family as it exists, the only form in which it is allowed to exist – the heterosexual patriarchal family – is key to maintaining both nation and community. Caste, race and community identity are produced through birth. But so too, is the quintessentially modern identity of citizenship. The purity of these identities, of these social formations and of existing regime of property relations is protected by the strict policing and controlling of women’s sexuality.

If this form of the family falls apart, then nation and community cannot be sustained. Not in the form they now exist.

But we have hesitated to attack the heterosexual family as such. We have of course, continually pointed to the oppression of women and children within the family, but we nevertheless reinforce existing family structures in many of our interventions, for example, on the issue of the Uniform Civil Code, or over the practice of dowry. In both

these instances the target of our critique is not the heterosexual, monogamous, patriarchal institution of marriage – we attack only the practices that surround that institution. Polygamy, dowry, domestic violence. And with each such intervention we assert in effect, that a *good* marriage would not have these features. Of course, we cannot stop such interventions. But do we have anything more?

Third – we have not seriously recognized the subversive potential of the “queer” identity. At its worst, the Indian women’s movement has been and is, homophobic. But even its best response to the question of sexuality has been in the form of ‘respecting choice’. Such a response leaves unquestioned heterosexuality as the norm – that is, ‘most of us are heterosexual, but there are others out there who are *either* lesbian *or* gay *or* B, T, or K.’ The alphabets proliferate endlessly *outside* the unchallenged heterosexual space. But if we recognize that this ‘normal’ heterosexuality is painfully constructed and kept in place by a range of cultural, bio-medical and economic controls, precisely in order to sustain existing hierarchies of class and caste and gender, then we would have to accept that we are all, or have the potential to be - ‘queer’.

This term is of course, untranslatable into Indian languages, because it comes out of a specific political appropriation of homophobic discourses by the non-heterosexual movement in the west. The term has its history and cultural moorings in that struggle. But the point is not simply to translate the word, which would raise legitimate questions about why we should not instead look to “our” history, and histories. The point is to use the experience of that struggle and of that term “there”, to remind ourselves that there are discontinuities and fluidities to the ways in which sexual desire has been experienced, constructed and appropriated “here”. The beginnings of scholarship in this area (for instance, that of Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai) point to the instability of sexual identities in pre-modern social formations in South Asia, and to the normalization of heterosexual identity as a part of the processes of colonial modernity. I don’t mean to valorize the “pre-modern” as the space of unambiguous freedom by any means, but merely to suggest that a recognition of sexuality outside heterosexuality, should radically destabilize what is understood to be heterosexual in the first place.

If all humans have the capacity to experience a range of sexual desire in a variety of ways, of which the heterosexual is only one, then those who believe they are *only* or *naturally* heterosexual, have been produced by a world that has been shaped before their birth, and because the penalties and punishment for breaking the rules are intolerably harsh.

So the 'queer' identity is another one which is, or can be, post-national, in the sense that without the strictly policed heterosexual patriarchal family, neither Nation or Community could survive.

Intimate relationships based on sexual desire, forms of community, nations - each one of these reflecting the human yearning to transcend loneliness, each one solidified instead, into barbed wire fences, violently policed. It's time to get out the wire-clippers...