

SEXUALITY AND FUNDAMENTALISM: Exploring Linkages, Confronting Challenges

Voices Against 377 is a coalition of Delhi-based groups involved with a range of issues – including women's rights, human rights, child rights and the rights of same-sex desiring people. We seek to generate dialogues relating to gender and sexuality, and to campaign against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (which criminalizes all non-procreative 'unnatural' sexual acts and is used to violate the rights of same sex desiring people). Sexuality encompasses a broad spectrum of experiences – relating to our body, our thoughts, our emotions, our relationships, our preferences, and our choices. Thus, sexuality is a part of all our lives. Our class, caste, religion, nationality, gender and sexual preference impact the way in which we experience sexuality.

Voices Against 377 has launched the 'Million Voices Campaign'. Through this campaign we hope to bring together various expressions on gender and sexuality. As part of this campaign, we have also been organizing meetings with groups in the city which work on a range of issues such as women's rights, caste based discrimination, health and so on. This meeting with various groups/ individuals who are involved in sustained work on countering fundamentalist ideologies, is one such effort.

Fundamentalist forces have long made use of the linkages with sexuality. It is not difficult to identify instances of the suppression of sexuality by fundamentalist forces in order to further their interests. Hindu right-wing forces have vehemently expressed their ideologies through sexual violence against Muslim women in Gujarat and through their violent reaction to the film 'Fire'. The recent vitriolic reaction of the Jathedar of the Akal Takth in Amritsar to the introduction of a bill permitting same-sex marriages in Canada terming homosexuality as 'unnatural and inhuman' is also a case in point. Additionally, religious texts including the Quran and the Bible are used by religious leaders to prescribe conformity to a set, moral standard of living; anyone digressing from this way of life are humiliated, ostracized and even killed. The rape of a woman in Manipur by Army personnel, which sparked off numerous protests in the country, points to the fact that the use of such methods of repression is not limited to non-state actors alone.

The use of sexuality by fundamentalist forces spans across mass scale carnages to choices of everyday life. In Gujarat long before any killing began, the bodies of women were centrally used to polarize the two communities. The rallying cry for large-scale mobilization of Hindus and for the first time adivasis was "They (Muslims) Despoil Our Women!" Building on prevailing Hindu-Muslim antagonisms, feeding into insecurities, stoking fears and the successful implanting of a belief that the majority Hindu community is under threat from the minority community led to the crossing of a certain threshold where an "othering" took place which enabled the most heinous crimes to be committed. The stereotyping of women into the categories of 'whore' and 'goddess', contributed to women of the 'other' community enjoying sex unlike the 'dutiful' good woman. Simultaneously, the men of the 'other' community get constructed as 'animal-like' and oversexed lusting after and a threat to the women of 'our' community.

In everyday life on the other hand, there is a constant opposition to inter-caste and inter-religious marriages and intimate relationships, more so with same sex relationships. This repression goes beyond external control to internalized guilt, anxieties and fears about different experiences of sexuality including masturbation. Therefore, any expressions of sexuality outside the accepted heterosexual norm are seen as 'perverted and deviant' constituting a potent threat to the 'moral and natural' order of things.

Fundamentalists have also used sexuality to create monolithic and oppositional identities between castes, community, tribes and religions. This process of creating binaries can be extended to those of heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine, men/women; normal/abnormal, natural/unnatural etc. There is a pressing need to identify these linkages and counter fundamentalism from different forays. The language of sexuality and queer politics allows us to deepen our efforts to understand and challenge the basis of fundamentalism(s), be it religious fundamentalism or militant nationalism.

Queer politics is much more than an assertion/celebration of diversity. It offers a vision of fluidity that counters rigid binaries and challenges structures of power. It is one of broader social change that goes beyond the issue of individual freedoms and the interests of same-sex desiring people including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. Such a perspective breaks the culture of putting a safe distance between 'us' and 'those whose rights we struggle for'. The challenge lies in making these interconnections our strength, in evolving strategies to work together and realize our dreams of a world where all people live with freedom and dignity irrespective of their caste, community, religion, gender or sexual preference.