

### *Lesbian Suicides and the Kerala Women's Movement*

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I've come to this conference to speak about a very specific issue: the incidence of suicides among young women in same-sex (lesbian) relationships in Kerala, and why this is an important issue for women's groups in Kerala to take up. This problem must be seen as a specific example of a broader issue which has been addressed and continues to be addressed in other parts of India: why it is important for feminist movements in India to take up and consider the rights of women who love women. We can also view it as part of a still broader agenda: why women's movements and other social movements need to recognize the rights of all sexuality minorities-- lesbians, bisexual women and men, gay men, and transgendered peoples-- as important social justice and human rights issues.

This problem of lesbian suicides is also deeply related to other issues of sexuality, especially women's sexuality. So I'm hoping this presentation will raise important questions and discussions about how women's groups in Kerala and other parts of India address sexuality, and who is included and excluded in these approaches.

I'm focusing on feminist groups in Kerala because that's where I'm living and working right now, and that's where these suicides are being reported, at least in the media. For about a year now, I've been trying to start something called Sahayatrika Project, developing support for sexuality minorities in Kerala, especially for women in same-sex relationships. We're trying to develop a support network for lesbian and bisexual women here, using a post office box and e-mail; as well as developing alliances among all people, women and men, of any orientation, who are concerned about the rights for sexuality minorities in the state.

Longer term goals include ensuring that services are available to women loving women and other sexuality minorities who need help, raising public awareness about issues, and advocating for sexuality minority rights. I've received a lot of help and encouragement in this project from some very committed women and men in Kerala, who have been concerned about the situation for people in same-sex relationships, and especially these suicides, for a long time.

At this point in time, we don't have funding for our project. So if it appears that there are a lot of areas which are left uncovered, or that our project has not yet addressed, this is one of the reasons why.

As I present this topic, it is important for me to locate myself and my relationship to this issue. So: I am a Malayalee-Keralite in origin, both my parents are Malayalees, but I was born and raised abroad. I am a bisexual woman who was active socially and politically in lesbian communities in Canada. I was also involved in Canada with many issues outside of sexual orientation, such as violence against women, racism, support for aboriginal peoples in Canada, anti-poverty and anti-globalisation activism.

It is also important, as I address these concerns within Kerala or Indian women's movements, to acknowledge my position as an outsider. I've been living in



Kerala for only the past two years, and my engagement with women's organisations here has been for less than one year. So I'm not speaking about this subject as any sort of authority or expert, but rather as someone who sees this issue as important and has begun the process of asking questions about it. I know that I have a tremendous amount to learn about this and other issues from everybody who is here.

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This past August, the story of two young Adivasi women who committed suicide was carried in most of the Malayalam language newspapers. These were young women, one was fifteen and the other twenty-two, and according to the newspapers they were living together for some time and wanted to marry each other. They sought help from their families and the police, and were seeing a psychiatrist shortly before their deaths. But, obviously, no one was able to help them: their dead bodies were found together in an outdoors location, near their homes.

This suicide was not an isolated incident. Malayalam newspapers have been carrying stories of lesbian suicides and occasionally gay male suicides for at least the past 9 years. I've handed out a list of media reports of suicides in Kerala by people in same-sex relationships. I will talk about how we can know whether or not these newspaper reports are true later on in this paper.

For the time being I would like to note, that between January 1995 and August 2001, ie. within a space of 7 years, *at least 21 women have been reported as 'successfully' killing themselves because they were unable to maintain a lesbian relationship.* Between 1993 and this year, at least four men, two gay couples, have also been reported as killing themselves. This media list is far from complete, we haven't obtained all the newspaper reports yet, and it only includes those suicides which the press (and/ or the victims' communities) identified as gay-related.

These newspapers stories tend to portray young women, under age 24 (pre-marriage age), who are unable to contemplate life without their same-sex partner. These women are also being portrayed as predominantly coming from working class or "lower middle class" backgrounds, and often belonging to other marginalized communities. I think it's important to consider these suicides as just one indicator of the situation for sexuality minorities, especially lesbians, in Kerala. It is really just the tip of the iceberg.

As heartbreaking as these newspaper articles are, they say nothing about those women (or men) with same-sex orientation who don't kill themselves, but either maintain an underground existence with secret partners, suppress their sexual orientation and get married, or live in isolation from others like them. These stories also say nothing about the many women who really don't really know what their true sexual orientation is.

I had been working on and off on Sayahatrika Project, with the help of other people, for about year before this most recent suicide happened. To make a long story short, we've received some positive responses and some negative responses to our work on this issue. In this paper, I will present some of the reasons different social groups and individuals, women's groups and others, have given against addressing

sexual minority rights, and lesbian rights in Kerala. I will then offer some counter-arguments to this resistance, as a basis for further discussion and hopefully action.

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**I. "How do you know these suicides are being committed by lesbians?? The media may be sensationalizing these stories to defame innocent victims or sell newspapers."**

This is an important question, and the fact is we don't really know for sure, although most of the newspaper articles seemed to give some substantiating evidence such as suicide notes, or comments from family or community members. In the case that happened last August, the two women seem to have told several people that they wanted to marry one another. A long term goal for Sahayatrika Project, if we get some funding, is to verify and document these reports. We consider this important because, besides the testimony of women themselves, these newspaper reports are among the only documentation that we have for the situation for women-loving-women in Kerala.

However it is highly likely, given that Kerala has one of the highest reported suicide rates in India, and that gays and lesbians all over the world are a high risk group for suicide, especially in youth, that the unreported suicide rate is actually much higher than what is listed here.

**II. "Lesbians are a small, obscure group. Discrimination against different sexual orientations is a marginal problem affecting only a small portion of the population."**

Is discrimination against sexual minorities a minor concern, or rather is it an invisible one?? I will argue for the latter. Sexual minorities in Kerala live an underground existence, with the suicides reported in the media being only one indicator, only the tip of the iceberg, of the many problems we face.

Same-sex love seems to be a phenomenon in all cultures and societies. Classical statistics say 10-12 % of any given population have a same-sex primary orientation and larger percentages of the population are bisexual.

In the weeks following the recent suicide, Sahayatrika Project has managed to get our post office box and email address published in a number of newspapers. We've received many letters and emails in response to the work we are doing, with several women writing in and identifying themselves as women-loving-women.

We've also received a strong response, via the internet, from people like me: gays/lesbians of Malayalee or part-Malayalee origin who live in other parts of India or the world. So we have this very interesting phenomenon where Malayalees leave Kerala and suddenly **become** gay, lesbian, bisexual, hijras. But while we live in Kerala we are totally invisible as living, breathing beings. I think this says much more about cultural constraints within the state than any predisposition of Malayalees to be overwhelmingly heterosexual.



III. "The recognition of lesbianism in feminist circles is really just an academic or theoretical issue carried out by elite feminists in urban centres."

Or "The gay/lesbian movement in India is largely an upperclass urban English-speaking (western-influenced) social movement."

Mainstream LGBT organizations in India are largely English-speaking middle-class dominated organizations that have been influenced and empowered by their contact with much more developed international LGBT movements. These organizations are nonetheless very important: they have created a sense of consciousness or identity for people where before there was none. Also many groups like Sangama or organisations in north India are increasingly trying to work with non-English speaking sexual minority populations from different class backgrounds.

But the fact is, even if the most visible section of this movement may come from a certain background [similar to certain types of feminism], it doesn't follow that all sexual minorities come from this same background. Like gender, sexual orientation and gender identity cut across all classes, communities, and castes. As with many of the women who committed suicide, lesbians and other sexual minorities from marginalized backgrounds face discrimination against their sexual orientation, on top of all the other marginalisations and discriminations they may be living with.

With the advent of the recent Amnesty International report on "Torture and ill-treatment based on sexual identity," organisations like the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, and publications like the PUCL-K fact-finding on human rights violations against sexual minorities in Bangalore, it is high time that social justice groups in Kerala recognize sexuality minority rights, including lesbian rights, not as an academic or elite issue but as an urgent human rights issue. It is time that these organizations recognize that in many societies across many communities and cultures, some of the harshest punishments and most flagrant human rights abuses are carried out against those people who are seen as "deviating" from perceived sexual and gender "norms".

The suicides in Kerala are another example of the urgency of sexuality minority rights as a human rights issue. These women are literally dying because of the lack of acceptance in Kerala society for same-sex relationships, and because of the lack of choice women here have around sexuality, marriage, etc.

As suggested earlier, while there are women from all backgrounds on this suicide list, there seems to be an **overrepresentation** of women from marginalized groups. The most recent suicide case was of two Adivasi women. The news story before this one involved a Dalit woman. Others on the list are described as: two women from "lower middle class" backgrounds, a tailoring and a beautician student, two women working in a shrimp factory, a tailoring teacher and her student, three women from "lower middle class" backgrounds, a daily wage labourer in rubber plantation, two college students, two girls from peasant families, and a tuition teacher and her student.

Why are so many of these suicides enacted by women experiencing **multiple marginalisations**—eg. Adivasi and lesbian, Dalit and lesbian, from a peasant background and lesbian, etc. We don't have an clear answer to this question yet; it is a question I would like to pose to the audience. My personal theory is this: women-loving-women from middle class or more privileged backgrounds, while also experiencing a lot of suffering, have more choices with which to deal with their different sexual orientation. One option such women have is to leave Kerala. It is also possible that those women who stay in Kerala have more resources available to them to either live independently and/or to maintain a secret same-sex relationship.

But women from more marginalized backgrounds have less choices, and less access to resources. The women on this list who are killing themselves are almost consistently young women of marrying age who are already in same-sex relationships. My theory is that, when time comes when these women are forced to marry, or are faced with the threat of separation, they don't have other options available to them. So they resort to suicide instead.

I should note at this point that there are some limitations to my use of the word "lesbian" in these contexts. I'm using this word to describe women in same-sex relationships; its simpler to use the term "lesbian". But these women may not have spoken English, and they most likely did not have access to English medium information about the culture of lesbianism. Possibly, some of these women did not even think about themselves in this way.

#### **IV. "You cannot expect women who are fighting for basic issues, such as starvation, to take on the fight for lesbian rights."**

Someone made this point to me, and at that time I agreed with her; however to some extent I am reconsidering this position. I've been considering that perhaps we shouldn't make assumptions about what feminists from marginalized communities think about this issue; it is probably more important to simply ask them directly. I can recall one of the first times I went to the women's center in Trivandrum, when I was just starting to talk to people about this project. I happened to talk to a young Dalit activist who didn't have much experience with this issue. And yet, after talking with her for 15 minutes about it, she was immediately supportive and offered to help.

So I've been wondering about **where** this resistance within women's organisations to sexuality minority issues comes from? Is it something that occurs uniformly throughout women's movements? Or is this resistance something that might vary, between women of different classes, or from community to community??

As mentioned earlier, a lot of these suicides seem to be happening in communities that experience other types of marginalisations. A question worth asking is how are these communities are effected by these same-sex death pacts?? For example, how do people feel when their female family members or community members take their lives because they couldn't marry, when absolutely no one in Kerala society is openly saying that there is nothing wrong with same-sex love. Would it make a difference if we were to go into these communities, and engage in discussion with those people??



If we did a fact-finding in the Adivasi community where these last two women killed themselves, could it be possible to do it in a way that was actually supportive of that community??

One of the reasons it is very important to gain the support of women's organisations on this issue is because of the relatively well-developed connections some feminist groups have with women at the grass roots level, egs. panchayat women, rural women, and women in popular movements. If we are truly going to address this issue of same-sex suicide in Kerala, and not only create an urban-based, English-speaking lesbian/gay social movement, we need to be working in cooperation with other social movements like the women's movement.

**V. This set of objections has to do with who is responsible for this issue, and how do we prioritize it in relation to other social justice issues.**

- a. **Lesbians need to take the responsibility for bringing this issue forward. This is your problem.**
- b. **Why is this an issue for the women's movement?? The women's movement is dealing with so many other more fundamental issues.**
- c. **Why are you focusing on lesbians when there are so many other problems in Kerala society?? Children are starving, not everyone has achieved basic literacy, there are broader issues of violence against women...**
- d. **Lesbians need to join other social movements, and work for other social justice causes, if they want other social justice movements to support them.**

The idea that lesbians and other sexuality minority groups have the main responsibility for addressing this problem comes out of a type of identity politics which I partly agree with: the idea that social movements need to be determined by and empowering to those people most effected by the issue the social movement addresses.

But this issue of lesbian suicides in Kerala is one example of some of the **limitations** of this type of identity politics. Now, these suicides have been in the public consciousness, because of the newspaper reports, for the past seven years. The question I'd like to ask is: did we really have to wait seven years for a self-identified "lesbian" [or bisexual woman] to come along before we could do anything about this??

And in the absence of any developed and visible gay/ lesbian/ bisexual/ transgendered movement in Kerala, which social movement is responsible for this??

I consider this problem of lesbian suicides to be a issue for women's organisations, first and foremostly, because it is women who are dying. And they are dying as much because of sexism as because of heterosexism. Probably the most

important reason these women are taking their lives is because, in Kerala society, the majority of women still do not have the choice **not** to marry men. It is imperative that women's groups recognize lesbians as being among the women who suffer because of this. When feminists question the relevance of lesbian suicides to the women's movement, it is almost as though they are considering lesbians to be something less than women. But lesbians are women too.

I don't think this issue is **only** a responsibility for the women's movement. Human rights groups, and gay-lesbian organizations [as they emerge in Kerala] need to take on this issue too. Ultimately, I am arguing for the inclusion and recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity as an important rights issue for **all** social justice organizations to support, in the same way that these groups may support the women's movement, environmental movement, Dalit and Adivasi rights, trade unions, fisher peoples' movements, and other popular movements. This recognition has been happening in other parts of India; (for example, activists in the Narmada Valley struggle will often support sexual minority rights in their public speeches.) But this recognition has not yet happened among social and political organizations in Kerala.

Clearly lesbian suicides are not the only social problem existing in Kerala. But in spite of all the popular movements and political organizations in this state, it seems to be one of the issues that no one really wants to touch. At some point we need to recognize that 21 women killing themselves because they could not maintain their same-sex relationship is **just as important** as 21 women dying of starvation; and certainly as important as 21 women being sexually harassed. To argue for anything else is to treat lesbians as being less than women, and less than human.

And while it is both ethically and strategically valuable for LGBT activists to be involved in and support other issues, at some point we have to support social issues because of their intrinsic importance, and not because of what we might get in return. For example, if I genuinely support Adivasi land rights in Kerala, I support it because of the historical injustice done to Adivasi people, and not because of some expectation of what Adivasi activists can do for me. Similarly we need to see the rights of sexual orientation as being intrinsically important, something we should work towards for its own sake.

Social and political organizations which are unable to recognize the validity of sexuality minority rights fail to recognize the interconnectedness between different oppressions; no single oppression exists in isolation from all the others. The inter-relationship between sexism and heterosexism, for example, is deep and complex. Women's groups in Kerala need to recognize that if we lived in a society where it was acceptable for two women to live together as lovers, a lot of other practices—such as women living alone, or women having sexual relationships outside of marriage, would have to be acceptable too. Recognizing different sexual orientations as different and legitimate ways of being really only creates more space for everyone.

**VI. The next set of objections are concerned with social attitudes towards sexuality, and also the consequences of lesbian visibility in Kerala society.**



a. Society is already saying that feminists just want free-sex. If we take on issues of lesbian rights, the women's movement is going to be further undermined.

b. Increased visibility for lesbians makes society less safe for other women. Women who are simply holding hands or living with their female friends will be accused of being lesbians.

c. Increased visibility for lesbians also makes society less safe for women who are having same-sex relationships, but are not "out" about it.

a. Being a lesbian has nothing to do with free-sex (although some people, such as the male consumers of a pornography industry that exoticises lesbians, seem to think that it does). But the fact is, women with same-sex attractions can have one partner, no partner, or multiple partners, the same as heterosexual women.

Furthermore, there's actually nothing **wrong** with being a free-sex feminist. I'm not trying to argue that this should be an ideological requirement! But, feminists need to recognize the right for a woman to have control over her own sexuality and her own body, and to be self-determining as a sexual being.

It seems that one of the fundamental obstacles for women's organisations in Kerala and other parts of India for supporting lesbian/ women-loving-women's rights is that we have unresolved issues around sexuality and the sexual rights (as opposed to the reproductive rights) of women.

And yet unless the feminist movement (among other social movements) gets past these cultural taboos around discussing sexuality, we cannot even **begin** to conceptualize what a Kerala feminist or South Indian feminist approach to sexuality would even look like. This culturally and socially sanctioned silence around sexual issues encourages and perpetuates a whole range of problems in Kerala society, from child sexual abuse to rape (within and outside of marriage) to sexual harassment. Marginalised sexuality minorities must also be counted among the vast array of people who suffer because of this silence.

Several activists who have worked on issues of reproductive health and sexuality, in both rural and urban settings, have remarked upon a cultural dichotomy. On the one hand, there is this idea that men have **unlimited** sexual rights: the right to make sexual comments, the right to harass, the right to be sexually satisfied whenever and wherever they desire. Even within marriage, men are supposed to be satisfied whenever they are aroused, and women still don't have even the legal right to say no.

Women, on the other hand, don't have any sexual rights, but are expected to bear all reproductive responsibilities. The dominant social values hold women as being primarily responsible for birth control and reproductive care, and often assign them moral responsibility for the fertility/ infertility of a couple, the spreading of sexually transmitted diseases, etc.

In recent years, some reproductive and sexual health programs in India responded to feminist critiques by increasingly focusing on male responsibility for reproductive health, fertility control and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. But what doesn't seem to have emerged yet is a corresponding feminist policy emphasizing education for women about their sexual rights.

To pursue this discussion further, I think that women's organizations in Kerala are doing invaluable work around what I would describe as women's "negative" sexual rights: the right to be free from sexual violence, rape, harassment, and exploitation. Indeed, one of the enormous challenges to women's groups is that these types of violence seem to be very pervasive in Kerala society, and not much understood. Now, it is possible to think about lesbian rights in terms of these "negative" sexual rights: for when a woman who is not sexually oriented towards men is forced into marriage, we can consider this to be a type of rape. However, clearly lesbians are not the only women who are being raped in marriage.

But what about women's "positive" sexual rights?? Feminist groups do not seem to have yet arrived at a common understanding about what these rights might be. And I think this is one of the fundamental reasons that feminists sometimes resist working for lesbian rights; it is because we haven't properly conceptualized what women's positive sexual rights really are.

Take for example, the right to a sexually fulfilling relationship. To whom should this right be available? Women?? Unmarried women?? Lesbians?? Children?? And is this an important or worthwhile right to have?? I am not arguing for an "anything goes", "free-sex" approach, for example in the case of children. But women's groups in Kerala seem to be a long way from articulating what is a positive sexual right, and what isn't. We need to be able to make distinctions, start drawing lines, and have the courage to draw them from a feminist perspective which may be counter to the traditional perspective.

Perhaps what I'm saying is obvious: that the women's movement resistance to recognizing and working for lesbian rights seems to be deeply linked to these unresolved questions around sexuality. And yet I think the situation in Kerala clearly demonstrates the importance of advocating for women's positive sexual rights. Lesbian suicides are one example in which the denial of such rights leads to death.

b. The argument that increased lesbian visibility creates more unsafety for all women is similar to argument that the visibility of sex trade workers makes all women walking the streets more prone to harassment. But really, if there were no sex trade workers, is it true that women would no longer be harassed in public places?? And aren't women sometimes harassed in places where there are no sex trade workers, like trains or buses or in their own homes??

Similarly, if there were no lesbians, is it true that women who live alone or want to live only with each other would not face discrimination??

Ultimately, the harassment of women who move freely in public spaces or live independently is a function of patriarchy. These harassments are rooted in the



patriarchal control of women's mobility through the constant threat of violence, and in the fear that men with patriarchal values have of the autonomy of women. Arguments that place responsibility for such problems on lesbian or sex trade worker visibility simply blame those women who are most marginalized by patriarchy, rather than seeking to understand the broader issues.

Furthermore, it is apparent that lesbian visibility, and the visibility of lots of other sexually related issues, is already present in Kerala, and probably increasing. Its just that it isn't necessarily positive visibility. For example, one of the main sources of visibility for lesbians in Kerala in the past ten years has been these periodic stories of double suicides in press. But until recently, these stories appeared with no contextualizing discussion, to suggest that maybe these women weren't mentally ill or societal aberrations but simply women with a different sexual orientation, who died because of the lack of choices presented to them by society.

Other sources of lesbian visibility in Kerala include: pornography (from blue films to the internet); tabloid magazines (one newspaper carried a two page spread of the most recent suicide, publishing the same photo of the two girls dead bodies three times, from different angles); media from other parts of India; and media from other parts of the world (from "Fire" to foreign films to cable TV).

Such media allow negative images and stereotypes to proliferate, reinforcing destructive beliefs. At the same time there is no social movement in Kerala that is critiquing these images or placing them in some sort of social justice/ feminist/ rights framework. I personally think that one of our tasks, as feminists or gay rights activists or social justice activists, is to deconstruct these images, and to give alternate readings and representations of these realities.

c. A real concern for Sahayatrika project has been the suggestion that increased lesbian visibility makes the Kerala situation less safe for women who are living their lives as lesbians, but are not "out" about their sexuality. It is something I thought about a lot when designing this project; so we emphasize as much as possible a respect for women's choices around their safety and privacy.

Yet there seems to be a clear need to create some sort of support and advocacy network, to counter the silence, ignorance and isolation which compels so many women to take their lives. Furthermore, the arguments previously made hold true in this case as well: with or without a socially-conscious raising of lesbian issues, lesbian visibility is increasing.

## **VII. The women's movement is not ready to take on this issue. The women's movement in Kerala is a young movement. This issue could split the movement.**

This is one of the most significant criticisms that we've faced from feminists in Kerala who are opposed to raising this issue. It is a very important objection to address.

The argument is this: in a society where inter-caste or inter-community marriages are sometimes vehemently opposed, where any sort of sexuality outside of marriage is considered to be taboo, and where feminism already is viewed as a major threat to the institution of the family, how do you fight for the rights of people in same-sex relationships?? There is also a parallel argument for those of us who are sexual minorities living in Kerala and not completely "out" in this society: how do we come "out" in a society that seems to have such strict values on so many issues surrounding sexuality??

But the **truly** pressing question, in my opinion, is: if the women's movement (and other social movements) are not yet ready to address this problem, then **when** will they be ready to address this issue?? And how many more people will have to die before that happens?? Many of the suicides in this list were compiled before I even came to Kerala. One of the people who was involved in this says he approached feminist groups seven years ago when these suicides were publicized, asking them to take action. At that time feminists said the women's movement in Kerala was not ready for this issue. And now, seven years later, women's groups are **still** saying the same thing. So then, when will we be ready??

Now seems like a pretty good time to me. There is a growing international recognition of the human rights of sexuality minorities; and increasingly women's groups in other parts of India are recognising the need to fight for these rights.

Many feminists inside and outside of Kerala seem to have the perception that the women's movement here is "behind" other women's movements in India. Another question worth raising is, why does this have to be so?? It is true that feminist groups in Kerala have emerged relatively recently, in a socially conservative state without a major cosmopolitan centre. But in spite of the our perception of Kerala as being 'one of the most patriarchal and oppressive societies for women', in spite of the high rates of violence and harassment here, lack of personal choice, and great political disempowerment faced by women in this state, feminist groups in Kerala have some clear advantages over women's movements in other parts of the country. We have high literacy rates, a high female/ male sex ratio, low birth rates, and high life expectancy for women. So why do we have to see ourselves as "behind", when we have so many things that other women's groups in other parts of India are still fighting for?? The Kerala women's movement actually has tremendous **potential** to become a truly transformative and egalitarian women's movement.

Ultimately I am arguing for a feminism that addresses the issues of **all** women at the same time, as opposed to one which replicates the marginalisations of the dominant culture by deciding which issues the women's movement is "ready" for and which it isn't.

Someone suggested to me once that I should start a new feminism, and see how many women would join it. And maybe that's what will happen in the end, for myself and other people who think like me; we'll have to start a different kind of women's movement. But I still don't understand why I should have to start a new feminism, when I agree so fundamentally with so many of the things that feminist groups in Kerala are already doing.



When women's groups and other social justice groups become open to the issues and struggles that are raised by people like me, we are not making these social movements weaker. We are only making them stronger.