

# NOTE ON EDUCATION & SEXUALITY — PRISM.

## Introduction

In this concept note, our effort is to share why and in what way the new curriculum framework needs to engage with sexuality. Before entering into this discussion we would like to spell out how we see sexuality. Sexuality is an important and multidimensional part of all our lives - encompassing among other things sex, pleasure, intimacy, danger, violence, fantasy, beliefs, attitudes and power<sup>1</sup>. Our experience of sexuality is located in the interplay of forces of gender, caste, class, abilities and religion. The essentialisms and inequalities that exist in this web impact our experience of sexuality. The relationship between these forces and sexuality is a two way process. Sexuality is an important element in how the forces of gender, caste, class, abilities and religion operate - towards maintaining and strengthening power equations. The labels 'good' woman, 'bad' woman, rules which go as far as taking the lives of those who dare to desire across the boundaries of caste, religion and heterosexuality, the dehumanizing denial of sexual rights to disabled people, humiliation of men who step outside of prescribed norms of masculinity - all provide evidence of how critical sexuality is as a site of construction and control in our lives.

In this context how the new curriculum framework addresses sexuality becomes critical in terms of

-Providing children access to information, skills and values which help them to make choices which are based on a recognition of self interest and respect for rights of others, be aware of the diversity which exists in sexuality and gender expressions, recognize and negotiate danger from those who seek to violate them, experience freedom from shame and the confidence to express what they see as right and wrong.

-Ensuring that the construction of sexuality, gender, caste, class, abilities and religion in text-books is such that seeks to not essentialize or discriminate against those who fall outside of the norms created by forces such as patriarchy, casteism, hetero-normativity and fundamentalism.

Before moving ahead, it is important to state that the intersection of sexuality and education is one that has not as yet, received adequate attention. What we share in this note is based on our understanding and experiences as activists and practitioners, and a limited review of material. What we hope to convey in the note is that sexuality within education is an arena towards which we all - educationists, activists, practitioners and academics - need to commit time and energy.

## Why sexuality in education -

### issues of construction of sexuality in educational material

Looking at how some of the current educational sites are constructing sexuality, what is striking is that one can no longer only speak in terms of the 'silence' around sexuality, it is the nature of the representations that need to be addressed. This reality also needs to be located in the contradictions in the context that the child is located in today. Blatant in media messages, part of most advertising strategies, unavoidable in public spaces, be it public transport or public hoardings touting all manner of goods from toothpastes to truck tires, popular media representation of sexuality, particularly in urban India, has an increasingly in-your-face quality. Despite this, as an intimate part of the everyday life of most people, sexuality is still relegated to a shadowy realm - it is directly never talked about but only referred to indirectly. It is regarded as part of the private sphere and though much of what we do assumes the presence of an underlying sexuality, rarely does the average person articulate it.

Returning to the theme of how the representation of sexuality within the text book is changing, as 'older' people, typically our experience in school had been that even if there was a last chapter in

<sup>1</sup> WHO draft working definition of sexuality, 2002

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical and religious and spiritual factors

the biology text-book on reproduction, it would not be taught. (In fact even reproduction in the animal world was avoided as a content area, the focus being on plant reproduction – a link maybe with the obsession with blossoming flowers in Hindi film love songs of the times!) In the scenario that is unfolding now, what we are finding is that sexuality is beginning to be referred to in education materials, but in ways that are hugely problematic. Sexuality within education today is increasingly becoming a tool for political contestation.

The National Curriculum Framework for Secondary Education, (NCERT, 2000) in Section 2.6 states that 'During the period of secondary education, emergence of desire and inclinations of sexual nature is a normal feature of students' psycho-physical development. This dimension deserves careful attention of the curriculum organisers. The idea that the Indian society does not approve of promiscuity and that self-control or 'Samyam' is one of the highly valued qualities ought to be underlined. This will generate among the youth healthy attitudes toward sex and respect for members of the opposite sex.' Section 2.9 goes on to say that 'The knowledge of and activities related to personal and community health assume great importance. An awareness of HIV and AIDS may be given. Students may also be acquainted with evils associated with promiscuity and child and drug abuse.'

'Adolescence education and sex-education may also be provided in a suitable manner. It would be desirable to generate suitable self-instructional material in this regard for different age groups of learners addressing to their needs and requirements and matching to their level of growth and maturity. It should be provided to all learners. Provision for separate teacher and classes may need not be encouraged. The whole approach should be such that each learner participates and learns ways of healthful living.' (2.9)

The promotion of self control is not being pushed only by the Hindu right wing forces, their bedfellows are conservatives in the West like Bush whose call for abstinence has impacted the nature of HIV/AIDS in India as well. Although not a recent publication, 'AIDS Education in Schools: A Training Package NCERT and NACO (1994)' – with its focus on abstinence, is not irrelevant even today. It also makes no mention of types of sexual activity - just 'unprotected' or 'risky' sex. Also, most materials related to HIV/AIDS are replete with moralistic messages which seek to instill fear. That sexual behavior cannot be impacted by such messages has been well established by research in other parts of the world (and here as well?) In a context in which there is little opportunity for most people to openly discuss issues of sexuality and even less to talk about sexual feelings, confusions, passions, doubts, messages about safer sex will only ossify. Moreover such material makes no reference to diversity in sexual behaviour. Unlike in the West, public prevention messages in India exclusively focus on heterosexual encounters because the transmission is primarily through the heterosexual route. Ignoring the existence of same-sex relations, other than being inaccurate, is dangerous. Same sex desire is far more common in India than most people like to believe. The resistance to address issues of homosexuality is a powerful one. Government policies such as the Reproductive and Child health policy and the Adolescent policy lay down guidelines for adolescent health education that state that homosexuality is deviant behaviour.

And the existence of Section 377 of the Indian Penal code which criminalizes all sexual acts deemed to be 'against the order of nature' only legitimizes such retrogressive policies.

But returning to the local-global dynamics, there has been a push, over the last several years, towards focussing on adolescents, through educational interventions related to reproductive and sexual health, life skills and family education. While a review of such material is beyond the scope of the current note, what can be said is that the impetus behind the material relating to reproductive and sexual health is population control and disease prevention. With these concerns being dominant the material is narrow in its focus, sexuality related issues which fall outside of these agendas is absent and the manner in which the messages are imparted are moralistic and fear inducing. There is great concern about these programmes being culturally appropriate and sensitive. Some of the more recent material on life skills however is more liberal,

but here again there is no getting away from the morality of those who create the curricula. We have therefore Population Education: A National Source Book (Vol 1) (prabha, is this also ncert?) which has a section on "family life" which states that masturbation is normal but also that "You might consider masturbation to be a sort of imitation of real intercourse. The big and real difference is that it is entirely self-centred while real love-making is very much a shared experience, a means of expressing mutual love, and a giving as well as taking of pleasure and emotional satisfaction"

#### **Why sexuality in education**

##### **b. Ground level realities**

That any curriculum needs to address sexuality is evidenced by the experience of Tarshi (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues), another member organization of Voices against 377.. TARSHI operates a telephone helpline that offers free and confidential information, counseling and referrals. In the last seven years has received more than 50,000 calls from people of all ages. 20% of all callers on the TARSHI helpline are between 10 to 19 years old, and belong to what is traditionally called the adolescent group. Of these, 77% are adolescent boys and 23% are girls. Adolescents' concerns that emerge on the helpline are: information about the body and its functioning, masturbation, nocturnal emission, sexual problems (e.g. erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation), foreplay, sexual acts and techniques, contraception, sexual pleasure enhancement, homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, relationships, sexual abuse, and so on. Tarshi has had calls on the helpline from students wanting to be taught anatomy and physiology of the reproductive system over the phone 'because the teacher did not do it properly and we have our final exam tomorrow'.

The same Convention in Article 24 states that the child has a right to "the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health", that "State Parties shall pursue full implementation of this right and take appropriate measures to develop preventive health care "and "shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children". Practices that mutilate physically are abhorrent and life-threatening and fall under the purview of this article which seems to look at health from only a physical perspective. Gender-discriminatory traditional practices mutilate psychologically and are therefore prejudicial to the health of children need also to be read into the interpretation of this article.

Article 19 on violence, includes protection from physical and mental violence, and sexual abuse, as also neglect and negligent treatment. Might not keeping from adolescents information on sexuality and on safety, be construed as negligence? To offer an example of how this translates into reality, let us look at the issue of safe abortions which in India remains a pressing concern. Unsafe abortion contributes to 12% of maternal deaths every year, according to the office of the registrar general of India (Government of India, 1990). The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act that was passed in India in 1971 makes the provision of MTP services legal as long as they are performed within twenty weeks of pregnancy by trained doctors and in institutions recognised by the government. According to government figures, the number of reported abortions is around 600,000 (Year Book, GOI, 1993). However, it is estimated that every year unqualified practitioners at unrecognized facilities conduct an additional five to six million abortions. These abortions go unreported because according to the provisions of the MTP Act they are illegal. They result in between 15,000 to 20,000 abortion-related deaths every year (Khan et al, 1999). Further, though abortion was legalised thirty years ago, and most women support the right to have an abortion not many are aware that it is legal.

There is a high number of second trimester abortions amongst adolescent girls because of the lack of adequate knowledge about sex and conception. Lack of access to safe abortions for adolescents is compounded by shame about sexuality, fear of ostracism and additional factors of cost. Trikha (2001) found that 90% of adolescents girls undergoing abortion services were unmarried, incest accounted for pregnancy in 16% of the girls, 11% were undergoing an abortion for the second or third time, 42% sought an abortion in the second trimester, and 56% of the abortions were carried out at unapproved centers by unqualified personnel. For these girls, safety



was less important than confidentiality and cost. As Jesani and Iyer (1993) rightly point out, for a liberalised abortion law to be effective it has to be backed by good infrastructural support and accompanied by a full range of other functional social services including sexuality education, health, pre- natal care, and protection from abuse.

Research has also shown that masturbation is a common sexual practice and is practiced by both genders, and that both boys and girls have misconceptions about it. Both boys and girls derive sexual pleasure from masturbation but also say that they feel guilty, ashamed and anxious about masturbating. The girls felt that masturbation causes weakness, disease, infertility and marital disharmony and the boys felt that masturbation would make them weak. This is a common misconception and is reinforced by quacks who promise a cure for this habit which according to them is a major cause of sexual problems. Questions about masturbation form a large part of calls on helplines and letters to sexuality advice columns.

Because sex before marriage is a particularly sensitive topic to discuss there are no definite figures indicating the extent of sexual activity amongst adolescents. However, studies from different parts of India show that sexual activity before marriage is common in both urban and rural communities. But the level of knowledge about the body and about sex is fairly low, even amongst college students in urban areas. Many young people believe that a woman cannot get pregnant the first few times that she has sexual intercourse. A review of research studies showed that up to 88% of unmarried young women seeking abortions did not know that pregnancy resulted from sexual relations.

Clearly, there is a great demand and need for information regarding sexuality. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in Article 13, states that the child (defined as any human being below the age of 18 years) "shall have the right to freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds" subject to restrictions as provided by law and are necessary to protect public health or morals. Opponents of adolescent sexuality education use the restrictions clause to argue that the right to receive information does not extend to receiving sexuality education as that sort of information endangers public morals. Schools in various cities in India refuse to hold sexuality education activities for fear that parents might object. These schools do not concern themselves with parents' views on the curriculum or the syllabi when it comes to other subjects that children are supposed to be educated about. Parents do not set school curricula - society does not give them that right. However, in the area of sexuality education parents' views on the subject assume great importance. The social cost that results from parental objections to sex education will be and already is high. Can society really afford these costs?

It is important to note that while some of the interventions being undertaken by NGOs with adolescents are progressive in many ways, the moment it comes to sexuality, those who are implementing the programme find themselves at a loss as to how to deal with the sexuality of the young people they work with. Nirantar, also a member of Voices, was called upon by one such programme, the leadership of which was well meaning and genuinely experienced the need for guidance in how to 'counsel' adolescents, especially the young men who came to residential learning camps and were rather sexually active, often with each other. Our response was gentle but firm. The young people might not be the ones requiring counseling for what appeared to be consensual sexual activity. What was urgently required was the opportunity for the staff to reflect on issues of sexuality - in particular where their own anxieties about sexuality were stemming from. This led to a training input on gender and sexuality conducted by Nirantar for the staff of the programme.

As part of the training programme, we showed a documentary film set in a basti in Delhi, called 'When Four Friends Meet' during which the most earnest and gentle of the four young men, giggled and said, "actually, when girls says no, they mean yes." During the animated discussion that followed the film, it became clear that this attitude was not limited to the young men in the

film – the male teachers of the programme were also of the same opinion. Some of the women teachers made interesting points including the one which went back to men's own childhood when mothers, in a patriarchal context, were often unable to enforce a 'no' when the sons wanted to go out, not study etc. One of the 'pearls' of the discussion was that "women cannot say 'no', until they can say 'yes'" The women teachers argued that if a girl were to say 'yes' to an advance that a boy made, she would promptly be labeled 'loose' women. In a situation in which the girl is actually interested, there is an inability to articulate that desire, which gets caught up in notions related to purity, shame and honour. So even when a girl says 'no' and means it, she is not taken seriously.

The tremendous work that has been done in recent years in the area of child sexual abuse also tells us that an environment in which children can speak their minds about sexuality without fear, goes a long way in enabling them to say that they have been violated.

The curriculum also needs to recognize the richness and diversity of sexual and gender expressions. This is critical for two reasons. One is that the curriculum needs to depict reality as it exists – any representation of sexuality as being only heterosexual is a false representation. It denies the multiplicity of desires that people, including young people, experience. The curriculum also needs to depict gender in all its forms. The notion inherent in curricula so far that boys have to look, dress and behave in ways traditionally associated with boys and similar assumptions that operate for girls – urgently needs to change. These constructions constitute a fundamental violation of the right of children to express themselves and also makes them further vulnerable to isolation, prejudice and discrimination. There are innumerable experiences, unfortunately undocumented, of young people who are same-sex desiring or who do not fit into acceptable 'masculine' and 'feminine' moulds, who have gone through their childhood and adolescence thinking that they were the only ones in the entire world who felt the way they did. The realm of exclusions also needs to consider those children whose parents, and in particular mothers, fall outside of the realm of traditional morality, such as children of sex workers, single mothers who are outside of marriage, same sex desiring people etc. This links also to a point about the way in which the family needs to be defined and represented in the curriculum. The nuclear family is not one which can be even said to be typical of the Indian context, and even so there is a need to represent the diversity that exists in the support structures that we form for ourselves.

**There is a need for a curriculum which deals with sexuality in ways that are open, matter of fact and positive – a curriculum not laden with a morality which is fearful of sex, a curriculum which recognizes that sexuality is also about pleasure and desire, and not only disease, reproduction and violations, a curriculum which delinks shame from sexuality. Talking about sexuality in a manner that attempts to divorce it from passion and desire, will continue not only to be nonsense, but will perpetuate misconception and prejudice.**