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Lesbianism: Ruling the Divide

Working Definitions and Where We Stand

Lesbian: For the purposes of this paper, a lesbian is any woman who experiences erotic attraction towards other women, is aware of this attraction, and either does or would like to act on her desires. Emotional attachment may or may not be a part of this attraction. We realise that many women who would fit this definition may not self-identify as 'lesbian' and we do not wish to impose on them the label; we use the category in order to coherently talk about the specific issues that arise out of such attraction and desires. We also recognise the word itself has a history – of usage and association – and that it is a modern construct, and we are aware of the class issues that the use of such a word cannot but help bring to mind. We hope, however, that we will be able to show that lesbian issues in India are not invalid because of these usages and associations.

Sexuality: Sexuality is the most publicly policed aspect of our lives at the same time as it is a private domain that defies logic and interference. It includes our sexual practices, preferences, and perceptions. Sexuality is more than sex.

Identity Politics: Insofar as we can trace discrimination to our real or perceived characteristics and/or behaviour, either individually or as a group, we require identities to unify against this discrimination. This unity is not at the cost of diversity within the unified group, and the purpose of unity will ultimately not be realised if the common ground for the identity becomes another criterion for exclusion and inequity. Identity politics, which has a certain use in organising against a common, also identified, 'other', can become a burden if it becomes the goal of a movement. Identity politics demands a prioritisation of common or group interests over individual differences, for at least part of the time, but this prioritisation, if it becomes the system within the group, only replaces old hierarchies with new. Many people in this room probably identify as members of more than one group, based on class or gender politics, for instance; it is important to note that 'woman' as a collective identity within the women's movement, and 'feminist' as an identity too, have given thousands of women a sense of solidarity with others – not just in the country but across national borders, and this sense of a common identity and shared principles has been the way that we have empowered ourselves. In the same way, the lesbian identity can be used as a tool for organising, not only for forming larger platforms from which to address the concerns of women-oriented women, but also to bring out commonalities with women who do *not* identify as lesbian or as any marginalised sexuality at all.

An identity based on sexuality is not removed from other identities, nor is it one that only lesbians or bisexual and transgendered women adopt, or need to adopt. It is crucial to remember that there is no monolithic, single lesbian identity. There are differences large and small within lesbian communities and we must be aware of the inability of any

identity to be fully representative. The most important point here is that the forces that discriminate against lesbians are mostly the same that discriminate against all women. Lesbian issues are not unconnected to gender issues, though they arise out of their specific, hitherto relatively unfamiliar, contexts and, therefore, seem alien to women's issues.

In the context of sexuality, it is worth repeating that our sexualities are not fixed, they are not unchangeable 'facts' that we wear as labels. Sexual orientation or preference is one aspect of sexuality and it is an also unfixed one. While it may seem difficult for a lesbian to imagine herself sexually attracted to a man, or for a heterosexual woman to imagine herself attracted to a woman, in fact, these attractions happen all the time, though they are not always acted upon or even recognised, because our ability to feel sexual attraction is conditioned as well, by the ways that we are conditioned to behave as feminine persons. This is not to say that our present choices of who we are attracted to are invalid, but only a pointer towards the fact that 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' are necessarily limited categories, which we sometimes adopt and which are sometimes thrust upon us.

Rights: Gender politics compromises women's rights regardless of other statuses that we hold; it cuts across boundaries of race, caste, literacy, poverty, urbanisation, disability, religion, appearance, and employment. It, therefore, also has the potential to bring women together, across these same boundaries, but only if all discrimination against women, whatever its obvious point of origin, can be understood to arise out of the same ideology – one that seeks to keep women in a subordinate position in order to facilitate and further patriarchal ends of property distribution and psychological dominance.

Any talk of rights must be talk of all rights. One of our inalienable rights is sexual rights. This is not only our right to be safe from sexual violence, our right to determine our reproductive activity, or our right to say 'No' – which are, of course, crucial, but also our right to say 'Yes'. It is our right to determine our sexual activity as well as preferences. The purpose of control over women's sexuality is to create silence and fear around sexuality, which has been effectively done over the centuries. Is it enough to only fight against violence and oppression, to wait for a better time before we can talk of pleasure and agency? We are certainly not saying that lesbianism is only about pleasure. In fact, lesbians face similar levels of oppression, but lesbianism is about pleasure just as much as women's sexuality is about pleasure and choice. (See *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984. We have drawn extensively on Vance's argument in the introduction to the said work.)

Sex, Sexuality, and the Women's Movement

Women's sexualities are controlled through notions of biological difference, reproductive capabilities, physical vulnerability, and the family, and social and legal laws are used to ensure that women conform to arbitrary standards of appropriately 'feminine' behaviour and *become* 'good women'. The ways in which women's sexuality is controlled and the reasons for this control are topics that have received considerable attention in the women's movement in India. Lesbianism, however, has seldom been included in these

discussions despite the fact that the women's movement is the closest natural ally of lesbian activism, and of marginalised sexualities in general, and that a feminist is better placed to understand lesbian issues than most other individuals. One of the reasons for this is certainly that to align with lesbian issues may entail sacrificing the few privileges or rewards that women receive for conforming to the norm, such as relative physical safety, and 'respect', or even being taken seriously as a feminist, as already mentioned.

Drawing on the alliance between the ideology and work of the women's movement and lesbian activism, in India, is not to suggest that one can fully incorporate the other. It only emphasises the common basis we have to understand that difference in this case not only does *not* make our issues exclusive, but rather, difference is the very impetus behind working together, if we are to avoid setting up our own hierarchical and exclusivist structures and cause further divides where they need not exist. In fact, we are fighting for our right to live in a world where difference is not only tolerated, but is celebrated and encouraged to flourish.

While resisting sexual oppression and violence against women, we need to distinguish between sex and sexuality – how they are linked and how they are separate. Sex is a part of sexuality but our sexual practices alone do not constitute our sexuality. Our sexuality has also do to with desire, pleasure, and fantasy, which may not be a part of our sexual practices. What is called control of women's 'sexuality' is actually only limited to sexual practice. Because sex is more directly linked to violence and to the threat of violence, it dominates our experience of sexuality, which can be a pleasurable thing. Control of sexuality, therefore, has to rely on internalised notions of women's sexuality. It has to make us believe that our sexuality, our sexual desires and seeking of pleasure, are inherently harmful and sinful. And the way that this has effectively been done is through sexual violence.

In the face of extreme violation, it is naturally difficult to focus on pleasure and the positive aspects of sexuality. It is then also difficult to think of sexuality as an unfixed and free aspect of our personality. But sexuality is free because it is not restricted to our body and to how the body can be controlled. Sexuality straddles both the realm of the corporeal as well as the mental, or the psychological, which makes it a complex and individualised feature of our lives, subject to simple and sophisticated forms of domination, but, for the same reason, more difficult to theorise and organise around. Our sexuality is sought to be controlled by laws, tradition, religion, medicine, and violence, which are such powerful forces in our lives that we are unable to see that sexuality is more than sexual control or danger. In order to be controlled, sexuality must be seen as a rigid set of behaviours and possibilities, which women must either adhere to or be punished for rejecting. In effect, then, dominant social and sexual norms are repressive for everyone, and rarely fit our actual, individual lives, for instance, the imposition of asexuality on widows, but sometimes the discrepancy is unusually highlighted, as with lesbians.

If it is true, as we believe it is, that sexuality intersects with all the other forces that determine who we are, what resources we have access to, and how we behave, why do we need to talk of sexuality, especially lesbian sexuality, separately?

Sexuality is a difficult issue because it is considered private. While sexual violence has been receiving a lot of attention from the women's movement, the public-private debate is still relevant to women's sexuality when we start to talk of lesbian issues. On first glance, lesbian lives seem to be unaffected by issues of reproduction, HIV and AIDS, domestic violence, and marital rape, but if we consider the fact that many women experience same-sex attraction but do not lead lesbian lives, that many women who are erotically inclined towards women are married to men, that gender roles and stereotypes play themselves out in lesbian relations as well, it becomes evident that what can seem to be essential differences are in reality only different expressions. But shame and violence, which are strongly associated with sexuality, prevent us from talking about sexuality outside of negative contexts.

What does it mean for the women's movement when the primary focus on sexuality, an area of discussion which is relevant to every woman, is from the angle of violation of women's bodies? Does it not imply an acceptance of the inevitability of gender discrimination, further perpetuating the fear that makes us focus on sexual dangers? When we prioritise needs over rights, such as our need to be physically safe over our right to determine our marital status, we restrict our vision to only fulfilling needs and run the risk of never looking beyond. Sexual violence works as a tool of control precisely by ensuring that all our energies are focused on avoiding danger, on achieving relative safety, without there being any time or inclination left over to look at real agency.

A connected point is the guilt that we experience when we say that there is more to sexuality than sexual violence. How is it possible to talk about pleasure and agency, when thousands of women live lives that are utterly devoid of basic human rights? Does it not seem selfish and elitist? Yes, it does. But here we would like to reiterate that violence works as a tool of control only because it consumes *all* our energies, it creates a conceptual landscape in which sexuality is demonised, and this demonisation is ready ground for prejudice and discrimination. It might seem, rightfully, that some women have the 'luxury' to talk of sexuality in terms other than of violations, but sexuality discourse is neither a luxury nor invalid because it sometimes originates from the relatively safe or privileged sections of society. Sexual rights are not just for lesbians, they are not just for certain classes, and they are hardly a luxury, as any woman who has faced sexual violence, whether it is rape or harassment or abandonment or eve-teasing or forced marriage, will agree. Precisely because there is danger, we need to look beyond it, to envision not just an elimination of negative expression, but a flourishing of positive expression.

Another hurdle when talking of sexual rights is the question of losing privileges, which is also related to hierarchies. Feminism has had to fight to establish its legitimacy. The women's movement has struggled long and hard to legitimise concerns of gender oppression. In this struggle, it has had to prioritise issues. It started with the grossest of

violations and has grown over time to expand its vision – for instance, from recognising the need to introduce laws against marital rape to fighting for the right of a woman to be single.

As long as social and legal structures go against women's independence and self-expression, can we all come out onto the streets to prove how relevant lesbianism is to the Indian context? The women's movement saw and acted on the links between issues of class, caste, religion and gender oppression. Issues of sexual orientation, however, seem dangerous when we look at the risks involved. An issue such as lesbianism poses the threat of de-legitimising the work of the women's movement, because it is considered a non-Indian, low-priority issue. Feminism had to prove its legitimacy in the Indian context to counter charges of Westernisation. For the women's movement, taking on lesbian issues might mean becoming vulnerable again to the same charges of Westernisation. But do we have the luxury of denying that sexual rights in general, and lesbianism in particular, are not our concern?

Lesbian Issues and Women's Issues

That there are common grounds on which all women are discriminated against does not contradict the fact that lesbians face particular problems that arise out of their sexuality status, the same way that some of single women's issues are specific to their marital status. A married woman's material and body resources are controlled by obvious stakeholders. Her resistance to any aspect of her marital life implies a rejection of the institution of marriage itself and this nullifies her power to resist from within.

Single women are controlled by social perception of their vulnerability. Their deviation from the norm is rendered powerless by the general belief that their single status (implying a single life) is more a result of compulsion than actual desire and agency. In a country where our primary relationships are with our natal and relational families (for women, in fact, the marital home is supposed to be dearer than the natal), a tacit acceptance of the inherent undesirability of singlehood helps to subvert the power of single women to serve as positive role models to other women. The status of singlehood also presumes asexuality or, at least, sexual non-expression, as does the widow status. Also, opting for a single life is considered socially irresponsible and an irrational decision, particularly in the light of the dangers involved, and this charge of irrationality goes to further invalidate the choice.

The widow is a figure that draws compassion because she attempted to follow the norm and is not at fault for being out of the mainstream. She must, however, accept the consequences of her status and settle for only partial participation in social life. She is symbolically shorn of beauty and rendered unworthy of desire. The presumption of control over her sexuality is not lessened by the absence of a direct controller, as she had no hand in gaining her current status and is assumed to revert to her (asexual and non-threatening and also 'available') status before marriage.

On the other hand is the figure of the prostitute. Either a victim or an active social deviant – in any case, certainly an outcast. The main criticism levelled against a sex worker is that she is a 'bad woman'. She is not appropriately modest, not adequately given to having decisions made for her, overtly insensitive to patriarchal expectations of women. These are characteristics that make her unfeminine. Her unfemininity in female form, in the context of a rigidly gendered society, serves to make her dangerous, thus she must be made inconsequential to social life. Yet, the prostitute is a category that is essential to defining the non-prostitute – the good woman. The prostitute must exist, if only to serve as a negative point of reference and a warning. She is, moreover, still presumed to be within the province of patriarchal control because of her sexual behaviour with men – one of the most powerful sites of women's control – and because she has more often than not internalised socially-conditioned dominant notions of what constitutes respectability.

The notion of sexual preference or identity does not figure in any of these situations. The individual woman's rights are compromised regardless of her orientation.

Then there is the lesbian – who may be the single woman, the widow, the prostitute, or the married mother. Insofar as the concept of the lesbian indicates a grave and voluntary deviance from gender norm, it is a powerful category and must, therefore, be controlled. Because an active embracing of the lesbian identity would render the more popular means of gender control largely ineffective, the lesbian identity has been sought to be vilified to ensure that it does in no way appear as a viable option for women (let me clarify that in using the word 'option' we refer to the adoption of identity, not to desire). Lesbianism as a concept then is tarred with the sense of shame and inadequacy that it is supposed to produce in the woman so designated.

Domination ensures its own success and longevity by allowing for difference (which it labels 'deviance') that it can name and control. Lesbianism is one such deviance. The greatest threat that lesbianism poses to the dominant ideology is in its rejection of conventional property relations, its disregard for the heteropatriarchal family structure, its refusal of conventional principles of sexual access, and its declaration of desire and agency. Unlike other women, whether in the mainstream or out of it, a lesbian's actual and potential sexual expression excludes the male entirely. But her life reflects, unlike that of the single woman, for instance, not merely an absence of the male, which in itself is not unmanageable, as we have seen with the widow, but a simultaneous and active presence of desire nevertheless. Where the prostitute is labelled unfeminine because of her actual and potential behaviour, the lesbian is called 'masculine', and rigid gender norms seek to suppress masculinity in female form.

All the categories of women mentioned above run the risk of being labelled whore or lesbian if they do not conform to the roles allotted to them.

Lesbian Sexuality

Common perceptions of lesbian sexuality include notions of promiscuity, unnatural and unnaturally large sexual appetites, genetic abnormality, and a desire to be men. Where the

prostitute is sought to be punished for not being a good woman, the lesbian is sought to be punished for not being a woman at all. Neither her reproductive capacity nor her

allegiance to the conventional family structure may be counted on as tools of control. One way that she is sought to be controlled then is by her being labelled diseased, and the naturalisation of gender roles over millennia supports the argument. The attempt at equating lesbianism with delinquency, and even insanity, tries to ensure its success by making the lesbian lifestyle seem so difficult to achieve, so unsafe, so unthinkable, that a woman who persists in following through with her desires does seem exceptionally single-minded, extremely oblivious to danger, unusually self-centred – and these pronouncements are used to disqualify her from the world of the rational and the 'normal'.

The equating of the lesbian with the masculine is also supported by the independence displayed or sought by many lesbians. (By 'the lesbian' we refer here to the stereotyped figure and do not intend to essentialise the identity.) That masculinity and femininity are arbitrary and convenient categories is further made evident by the fact that an act takes on different meanings depending on its context. While a Mother India ploughs the field (with help from her young sons), this grave violation of gender roles is mitigated by her context, which includes involuntary singleness, her adherence to sexual norms, and her commitment to her children. A lesbian ploughing the field, which she must to support herself and her family, has no such 'protection' and it is precisely her conscious and active flouting of social norms that invites censure.

Lesbian sexuality is anti-social because it can disrupt social order based on gender hierarchy and roles. By its nature, it can blur the superficial distinction between female and male. Because it challenges some of the basic tenets of social life, there can be no excuse for lesbianism in social perceptions – not fate, as for the involuntarily single woman, the abandoned woman, or the widow; not degradation due to coercion and poverty, as for the prostitute who is an innocent but permanently marked victim and who has internalised the social condemnation of her life and her humanity; not the perversity that comes from degradation, as for the prostitute who, once fallen and knowing she will forever be a prostitute, chooses to continue in the profession even when she ostensibly has other options; not even the excuse that subjects of domestic violence have when they choose survival over social expectations and leave their abusive husbands. This is not to imply that a lesbian leads a life of freedom. In fact, we have seen how this is not the case, but the threat that her potential and desired life can present is sought to be undermined by the misconceptions and stereotypes around lesbianism.

Control of Lesbian Sexuality

So, how is the lesbian body controlled? And how is the lesbian mind controlled? To repeat the point made earlier, lesbian issues arise out of the same ideology of discrimination as all women's issues, and the silence or partial participation in social and political life imposed on all women also regulates lesbian visibility. Lack of resources, literacy, opportunities for employment, family support, and confidence determine

whether a woman is able to decide her own marital status and her reproductive functions, as well as whether she is able to be true to her sexual desires.

The deliberate erasure of women's history also affects the evidence that lesbians leave behind of their lives. When a woman is able to lead a lesbian lifestyle, which could mean, for example, that she lives with another woman as her partner, she usually does it with discretion. This caution in turn also affects her self-identity. She does not fully claim the title 'lesbian', even to herself. She is not entirely honest with her employers, her family, her landlords, often even her friends. She is cut off from many aspects of social life, for example, she may not be invited to family weddings or the invitation may not extend to her life partner. She is invisibilised in policy decisions about women's sexuality and education, because women are worse paid than men, the lesbian is not important to market forces, and her family structure is not deemed a legitimate one.

The lesbian is accorded partial citizenship rights. She is required to fulfil citizenship duties, such as, pay taxes, but does not have the right to a legally recognised and binding union with her partner. She and her partner cannot adopt children as a couple, she is denied her inalienable right to health (and thereby, her fundamental right to life) because of prejudices against and ignorance about parallel sexualities. Her sexual practice being punishable under law, she is vulnerable to coercion, threat, blackmail, and forced marriage. Moreover, lesbians are seen as single, therefore, available women and are easier targets of violence.

The most powerful tool for controlling the lesbian has been, obviously, homophobia, but also internalised homophobia. Homophobia, and internalised homophobia seek to control the power of different sexual expression, if they cannot destroy it. A woman who herself believes that there is something wrong or unnatural about her, or that she must be a man trapped in a woman's body, because she loves another woman, is not very likely to question social, gender, and sexual norms. At the most, she will quietly try to live her life as well as she can.

In conclusion, we would like to draw attention to three points. One has to do with the connections between lesbian issues and those concerns of women that the feminist movement in India has already recognised and legitimised. An attempt was made in this paper to point out these connections.

The second point is about the intersectionality of all issues that are of concern to a democratic society. Feminist issues as well as sexuality issues are closely linked with issues of religious fundamentalism, caste, nationalism, and sexism. Gujarat, for instance, serves as a good example of the way that issues of nationalism, violence towards the 'other', violence especially towards the women of the other, and the sexualised nature of this violence, point towards a larger aim of social dominance. This dominance seeks to obliterate the different, it seeks to destroy all that may hinder its social and political vision of control. The woman, or the feminine, is the most easily othered subject in this struggle. In the same way, the lesbian can be othered in the women's movement if her concerns are not seen to be stemming from common concerns. There are parallels

between all forms of exclusion and dehumanisation, and it is impossible to address one or a few of these while neglecting others. Or, in Charlotte Bunch's famous words, 'No woman is free unless she is also free to be lesbian.'

The third point is that of difference within the concept of lesbianism itself. Because class, caste, religion, nationality, literacy, and other factors inform and determine issues of sexual identity and desire, as they do other gender issues, there is no single, universal lesbian identity that we adopt or aspire to. There are as many ways of being lesbian as there are of being women.

Thank you.