

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION Lesbian sexuality and the women's movement

Presentation at the
National Consultation on the Right to Marry -
Mercifully changed to 'if, when and whom to Marry'
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This paper seeks to examine the question of representation of lesbian sexuality vis-à-vis the women's movement in the Indian context. We map who is saying (and who is expected to say) what (or not) about lesbian sexuality. This is followed by an account of the experiences of lesbian women with respect to the theme of this seminar - marriage. This account seeks to examine the validity of the kind of representation of lesbian sexuality that is being made as well as the validity of assumptions about who should be representing these issues.

A clarification that we would like to make is that we use the word 'lesbian' to mean any woman who is sexually attracted to another woman i.e. any woman whose sexuality is not included within the heterosexual 'norm'. Although the word should possibly be used only for women who self-consciously adopt this identity, we use the term here for the sake of convenience.

WHO SAYS WHAT?

Those who choose not to say very much at all on lesbian sexuality often say that 'in the face of poverty, starvation, religious fundamentalism... how can we speak of speak of such an issue' or 'this is not a priority for the poor women that we work with.' In the hierarchy of rights, sexual rights are, if they register at all, at the bottom of the ladder. Issues not addressed in this articulation - Is it possible to divide rights? Are there interconnections between rights?

There are also feminists who will say that women in 'relationships' with other women have considerable space in the Indian social/cultural context. In this articulation, the line dividing intense friendships between women and sexual intimacy is a fuzzy one. Some would even wager that in the face of a deep emotional commitment between two women, does the sexual element even matter that much? It is also often said how much easier it is for two women to live together than for a woman and man who are not married. Or that we in India do not need to follow the Western path of assertion of a lesbian identity. In fact if we were to do so, we would jeopardize the space that such intimacy enjoys.

Who has this 'space'? How conditional is it? Such questions are not part of this articulation.

When Fire threatened these approaches, we focussed on the violation of freedom of expression and lashed out against cultural fascism, sidestepping the lesbian question almost entirely. When we did speak of lesbian sexuality, what many said was that 'we don't have a problem with it', the 'choice' is after all is a 'personal' one. (Our *mantra* of personal is political somewhat in jeopardy here.)

One cannot ofcourse speak of the response of 'the' women's movement as a whole. There is a history of autonomous women's groups responding to violations faced by lesbian women, for example Leela and Urmila, the policewomen from MP who were dismissed from their jobs because they got married (1987). Or the opposition expressed by autonomous women's groups when seven girls from a school in Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala were expelled for forming the Martina club (1992).

The last eight years have seen the formation of lesbian women's groups in some of the metropolitan cities¹, running helplines, support groups and in some cases providing a political forum for activism. In most instances these are groups that have strong links with autonomous women's groups. There have been significant instances of lesbian women's groups raising issues (be it the participation of lesbian women's groups in March 8th celebrations in Delhi or highlighting of lesbian suicides in Pune), which have evoked a supportive response from autonomous women's groups. There have also been important expressions of support extended by the senior leadership of the larger women's organizations to human rights violations faced by activists working on issues relating to sexuality. It is important to point out here, however, that these instances of support have been in the context of violations and not in the defense of rights articulated in a positive/proactive manner.

A question that arises in this changing scenario is who will represent issues of violations relating to lesbian sexuality. With the emergence of lesbian voices, will we see a heavier burden and assumption that lesbian women's groups will initiate a response to violations? Other women's groups or human rights organizations will then become allies in name, standing in the background in the process. Or will these groups respond to violations on the basis of a recognition that the underlying ideologies and mechanisms threaten what we all stand for? For example is the issue of lesbian suicides to be seen as an issue that affects a minority (based on sexual orientation) or will it also be seen as a manifestation of the way that all women's sexuality is sought to be controlled and the implications therein. This is an issue

¹ These include Calcutta, New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore and Trivandrum

which is explored later in the section on the questions that arise from the nature of representation in the context of ground level realities.

LESBIAN WOMEN AND MARRIAGE

As stated before, the attempt here is to see how what is being said about lesbian sexuality relates both to the realities of women's experiences and the goals of the women's movement. Listed below are some of the violations that lesbian women face in relation to marriage. The sources of information at present are media reports and experiences that have been shared within the lesbian 'community', which due to various socio-economic factors, exists only in urban spaces. Documentation and research on issues relating to lesbian sexuality are still at an initial stage. We have categorized the violations experiences in situational terms, although common to them are the underlying forces of patriarchy and heteronormativity (as the term suggests - heterosexuality being established as a norm, alternatively and more fondly known as - heteronormatitus!).

Invisibility

Patriarchy is constructed and enforced in a way that militates against women acknowledging their desires. And when these desires are for another woman, processes of socialization seek to ensure that women do not even entertain the possibility that these desires could be realized or even entertained. The silence can be deafening.

Desires being what they are, it is often not possible to suppress them. While struggling to find space to express one's sexuality, there are the battles with guilt, shame, the feeling that one might be abnormal/perverted. The task of making women succumb to the pressure of marriage becomes easier with such internalization of misogyny and homophobia. The processes of censorship work in powerful ways.

Pressure to get married

Pressure tactics used on women whose families discover that they are lesbian include taunts, being subjected to in-house imprisonment and physical violence. It could also mean being sent to a mental health professional to be 'cured'. This could range from counseling to strong sedation to conversion therapy that might include shock therapy.

Lesbian Suicides

Faced with the prospect of marriage there are young women who have chosen suicide. With the exception of a fact finding report by ABVA (AIDS Bhedbav

Virodhi Andolan) on the suicides of Mamta and Monalisa in Orissa, the only other source of information available is newspaper reports. Although newspaper reports do not capture the extent of lesbian suicides across the country, the examples that they do provide are important for understanding this deeply disturbing phenomenon.

In the months of October and November, 2002 newspapers reported three lesbian couples who attempted suicide. These included two young women who were found dead in Satyamangalam forest in Tamil Nadu. They had taken poison. In their suicide notes they begged their parents to at least not separate them in death. Two women threw themselves in front of a train in Bhuj, Gujarat. Their suicide notes said that they were ending their lives because their families had arranged their marriages. Two young women consumed poison at a coffee plantation near their homes in Kerala. On this day, one of them was to get engaged. The other was to be married in January. They died on the way to the hospital.

The maximum number of reported lesbian suicides are from Kerala. Between 1995 and 2002, 22 cases of lesbian couples committing suicide together were reported in the Kerala press. Out of the 12 couples about whom some details are available, a majority of the young women were from labouring or lower middle class backgrounds (workers in shrimp factories, daily wage labourers in a rubber plantation, peasants). This begs the question - are same-sex desires between women and heterosexism not issues that cross-cut class and other social divisions.

Implications of same-sex marriage

For women who have chosen to get married to women, the implications have included social ostracism, being driven underground, harassment by the media, loss of employment, threats by the police and being taken to court.

There is also the issue of women who feel that the only way in which they can have a relationship with another woman, is to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. In the absence of exposure to the possibility of relating to same-sex desire as normal, or to women who are able to lead their lives as lesbian women, they feel that they have no option but to give up their identity as women. (This is not to say that all women who want to undergo sex-reassignment are doing for the above stated reason, but the experience of help-line counselors and support groups, as well as individuals women's accounts suggest that a majority do.)

Spousal abuse after forced marriage

Physical violence by a husband on discovering that his wife is attracted to women has been used in a bid to control her sexuality. Also, having to engage in sexual relations with someone of a sex you cannot feel attracted to, can well be argued as

amounting to marital rape. If a lesbian woman wants a divorce, she obviously cannot reveal the reason for wanting to do so, in the fear of facing dire social and familial consequences. In an urban context, support can be found, at best, in a friend or two. Custody of children is greatly complicated by the possibility of her sexual orientation being revealed.

Although both men and women face the pressure of marriage, we need to factor in the much greater space for sexual expression that men have, even after having been forced into marriage against their will. There is no dearth of examples of married men who continue to have sexual relationships with other men. The gender/power differential between lesbian women and gay men is also reflected in the significantly larger number of interventions aimed at MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) particularly in the context of HIV/AIDS related work. Not only is number of support groups and services available to men much larger, so is their ability to access these services, given their relative advantage in terms of mobility, control over financial resources etc.

THIS SET OF EXPERIENCES RAISES SEVERAL QUESTIONS:

- What is it that we mean when we say that lesbian women have 'space' in our cultural context and that there is no need to disrupt it? Even in the context of urban women who are financially independent and might have some supportive friends, the 'space' is conditional. There is the fear of being discovered, the limited situations in which lesbian identity/desire can be expressed. In most other contexts there is virtually no space - ranging from denial of the existence of lesbian sexuality to the kinds of violations listed above.
- What does it mean when we say that sexuality is not an issue to be put on par with other forms of oppression? Does it mean that the experiences of women attracted to women do not matter? We can't provide a percentage of lesbians in this country. The social pressures to conform to hetero-patriarchal norms render such statistics impossible. How do we know that members of our families, our organizations, women in communities that we work with are not among those struggling against lesbian invisibility?

Or when we say that sexuality is not a priority, do we mean that only issues that affect the poor are priorities? If so, the myth that lesbianism is a 'phenomenon' (read luxury) amongst the elite is dispelled by evidence such as the labouring/lower middle class/rural or small town backgrounds of the young women in Kerala who have committed suicide.

- To what extent is sexuality about personal choice? The experiences outlined above clearly indicate processes of socialization, internalization, pressures to conform to strictly defined norms and punishment if such conforming is not accomplished. How personal is this and to what extent is there a choice?
- What is the framework within which we wish to locate issues relating to lesbian sexuality? As mentioned above one framework is the identity based one, with its corollary of a minority-majority and the other is the framework of intersectionality. Before assessing the relative value of these framework it is important to reflect on the nature of any identity based politics and its implications. While an assertion of identity is important to counter invisibilization, build a sense of community and to create support structures within these communities, there is also a need to recognize the dangers inherent in identity politics being pursued as an end in itself. Experience of Western countries points to the possibility of new norms and hegemonies being created in the pursuit of a gay or lesbian identity. There is also the danger of the assumption that individuals/groups of that identity will be the votaries for issues related to that identity. (Would we want only Dalit women to be the ones primarily responsible for responding to violations related to caste, with women from other castes/religions playing only the role of 'allies'.)

The other framework of intersectionality, seeks to examine connections between different axes of construction and control be it gender, religion, caste, class or sexuality. An important implication of this framework is that the question of who represents an issue is not limited to those who subscribe to a particular identity. It is legitimate and desirable that those who are concerned with the underlying factors be fundamentally linked to the issue, not merely as allies.

In this context it might be worth making reference to the approach with which secular individuals and organizations have responded to the threats faced by religious fundamentalism. When Muslims have been the target, the response of secular forces has been informed by the intersectionality framework, in which those who identify as Hindus, for example, see the threats that religious fundamentalism poses for us all. The response is not only one of a majority community defending the rights of a minority community.

Returning to the issue of whether sexuality ought to be part of an organization's/movement's agenda, in this framework, the response of women's groups and other individuals/organizations to violations faced by lesbian women would be informed by an understanding of how sexuality is used to construct and control us all. Such a response would recognize that issues such as the

inevitability of marriage and the grave challenges faced in order to make decisions fundamental to our lives - are issues that face all women. Any group committed to human rights would see that when the right to life, the right to lead a life of happiness and dignity, the right to bodily integrity and the right to liberty are threatened, then it is the mandate of the group to respond to violations that lesbian women face. The response would not be 'merely' of allies defending a sexuality minority whose rights are being threatened.