



# TO PORN OR NOT TO PORN?

~ that is many a question ~



A letter on an e-list last September titled "*PUBLIC INTEREST ALERT: Delhi Times promotes pornography and alcoholism*" became the trigger for a fresh debate within Saheli on issues of censorship, morality, pornography and representation of women in the media. While the letter urged readers to approach women's groups to "take up the issue on a large scale", it drew responses from many other quarters debating censorship vs. freedom of speech, and expressing concerns that often conflated sex work with trafficking, consuming alcohol with alcoholism, and sexually explicit material with pornography that directly led to violence against women.

Women's groups have always been deeply concerned about women's representation in the media, the commodification and certainly, the projection of women as sex objects catering to male constructs of sex appeal is disturbing. Of equal concern has been issues of the effect of such representation on all women and its connections with violence on women. Yet over time there is also a growing concern that moralistic positions, or indeed exhortations of censorship and arming the government with more powers to 'censor and ban' are more than likely to backfire on us. And often lost in the blur of these concerns are crucial distinctions between sexism and sexual explicitness, coercion and consent. As women's groups, we have often found legal interventions to be inadequate, and in fact resulting in the promotion of a retrogressive image of women, rather than in the enhancement of women's rights. The Indecent Representation of Women Act (1986) prohibits Indecency, which it defines as "the depiction of the figure of the woman as to have the effect of being indecent or is likely to deprave or corrupt public morality." And yet we know that the suppression of sexually explicit materials under obscenity laws has included literature on feminist issues like reproductive health, clitoridectomy and safe sex issues. In the heat of the debate being sparked off by the letter, our anxiety was that conservatism being projected under the banner of women's rights could be dangerous, particularly in the present context of ascendant right wing orthodoxy that seeks to control women's sexuality and freedom in particular, and clamp down discussions on issues of sexuality in general.

Clearly the issues compel constant challenging of our own understandings, responses and strategies. In order to try and break fresh ground on the matter, we at Saheli ventured into a discussion on the uncomfortable issue of pornography - sure that in the course of our discussions we would end up exploring many issues of censorship and morality. And we did. During our several free flowing discussions we talked about our experiences, understanding and discoveries with no "goal" of arriving at a consensus or, even more daunting - a "Saheli stand"! We would like to take you through the debates we had, areas of consensus and discomfort and various other grey areas that lie in between, with the hope that it will prompt you to write in with your comments and opinions... or take the discussions/debates further.

**Porn Vs Erotica** ❧❧❧ In the beginning there was the word... so we tried to get to the root of some of the words that kept cropping up in our discussions. Porn and Erotica were two most crucial terms that kept coming up. And the recurring question: what if any, is the difference between them?



The Oxford Dictionary defines:

**Erotic** as "of or causing sexual love, esp. tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement."

**Erotica** as "erotic literature or art" [the root is from the Greek *eros*: sexual love]

**Pornography** as "the explicit description or exhibition of sexual activity in literature, films, etc., intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings" [interestingly, 'pornography' draws its root from the Greek word *porne* for prostitute + *grapho* for write].

**The opinions aired amongst us also reflected several areas of uncertainty.**

?? is the difference between pornography and erotica merely a matter of taste and aesthetics ??

?? is erotica tasteful and pornography crude ?? how class/culture specific are these terms ??

?? Does such a distinction then, reflect the arrogance or differentiation between 'higher aesthetics & lower aesthetics' ?? or is it a matter of personal comfort and value ??

???



"What I like is erotic and what I am uncomfortable with is pornography" -Then, could pornography be erotica for Jane and pornography for Jenny? Or is erotica more sensual and relating to the mind and body, while pornography that which objectifies and focuses only on peno-vaginal stimulation? Is erotica male/female/gay/lesbian while pornography only a male/patriarchal view of sex and the female body? How do we deal with the violent and submissive acts that pornography depicts? (And of course, the immediate counter question: what do we think of 'other forms of sex and sexual expression?')

When we ventured beyond ourselves and explored the matter on the internet, we saw that we're not the only ones entangled in these quandaries, and that beyond a point the only difference between pornography and erotica seems to be a moral one. Theorists like Gayle Rubin have vociferously questioned society's moral positioning on matters related to sex. As far back as 1984, Rubin's article, *'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality'*, discusses the oppressions that fall upon groups of lesbians and gay men in the context of a more general intolerance of sexual difference, and a fear of (or at least a distaste for) sex itself. Rubin equates a shoe fetish with a taste for spicy food. To what extent are sexual preferences similar to, or different from, tastes in food or fashion choices? Society views one as a harmless variety and the other as a challenge to the current moral order. How is sexual expression also a symbolic support for, or a criticism of, the system of sexual norms as they currently exist? She sees intolerance of gays and lesbians as part of a broader "moral panic" which targets pornography, S/M, leather, prostitution, birth control, divorce, and sexual expression in general. Underpinning these discussions were several concerns and positions that feminists over the ages have, and continue to debate. Here are some of the main strands of thought and arguments, both in favour of and against pornography.

## Pro & Anti-Pornography Positions within Feminism

### The Anti-Pornography Position

[Articulated by feminists like Catherine MacKinnon & Andrea Dworkin.]

#### Theoretical Basis

- ❖ The primary axis of oppression is not class, but gender.
- ❖ The objectification of women is the primary mechanism of oppression.
- ❖ Objectification fosters an expectation of women's subordination and sexual availability to men.
- ❖ Women's subordinate position is enforced through rape and random sexual violence.
- ❖ Women's objectification is exemplified by, but not confined to, pornography. There is a continuity between hardcore porn, soft porn, and mainstream advertisements.
- ❖ "Pornography is the theory and rape is the practice." Pornography shapes men's expectations and beliefs about women. It "trains" men to expect sex from women and to believe that women like forceful sexual encounters.
- ❖ Pornography is a form of "hate speech" that encourages violence toward a specific group, akin to burning a cross in an African American's yard, or painting a swastika on a Jewish person's business.
- ❖ Pornography is an act as well as a representation. The production of pornography subjects women models to objectification and violence.

### The Pro-Pornography Positions

[These positions tend to come from three distinct groups within feminism: female pornographers and performance artists (Pat Califia, Susie Bright, Annie Sprinkle); liberals, including liberal feminists, opposed to censorship; and representational theorists (such as Gayle Rubin).]

#### Theoretical Assumptions

- ❖ Objectification is an inevitable aspect of representation.
- ❖ Pornography, like any other representation, is subject to interpretation: its meaning changes depending on the context within which it is read and/or viewed.
- ❖ Pornography is not reducible to a single message or effect. Nor are all or even most models and/or sex workers exploited.
- ❖ The causal links between pornography and sexual violence cited by anti-porn activists are mostly anecdotal or from poorly designed studies.
- ❖ Anti-porn positions rely gender differences by perpetuating confining notions of gender (women are pure and men are evil) that attempt to police women's desires and identities (women can't be butch and still be women) as well as men's identities (men can't be submissive, masochistic, or femme).
- ❖ Because of the way they privilege gender over sexuality (always interpreting sexuality as a function of gender and not vice versa) anti-porn positions are heterosexist at best and homophobic at worst.





## Different Voices on Pornography



What is our real concern with the issue of pornography? Is it that we 'feel insulted/degraded' with the kind of representation we see... if so, are we saying that anything we are 'not comfortable with' is pornography, and thus, unacceptable? Or is it the impact of this kind of representation in shaping mainstream male sexuality? But then again, is pornography the only major influence that shapes male sexuality? Are there not various other images from many other mediums that feed into it? In conflating everything from commodification of women's bodies to women in the beauty business to the sex industry are we not erroneously creating a 'Sati-Sita-Ma-Devi' kind of moral code, not very different from that of the Hindutva brigade?

A major anti-pornography argument has always been that of commodification of women's bodies, sexuality, its conception of representing women as sex objects for the pleasure of men and the exploitation of women within the industry. But to assume that women are always getting exploited may be denying women any agency in the matter. Are we saying all women are victims... constantly manipulated even when we think we are acting of our own will? We need to get out of this mentality.

*A lot of people, both women and men, may not have the space and the luxury of finding 'high quality' sexual experiences to discover the 'finer points' of sex and sexuality as we define them.*

*Is it really women's 'instinct' to oppose pornography? If so, how do we oppose it? I've been told that women's groups used to blacken billboards that had suggestive pictures or semi-clad women in them... why did you do that? Did you think it worked? In retrospect, would you raise the issue in a public domain in a different way?*

The pornography industry is controlled by business'men', who run the empires and make profit from women's exploitation... but then almost all economic empires are run and controlled by men, so why target only pornography?

The truth is that many of us think pornography is okay as a private activity, but violative in public spaces. For example the use of public computers to surf pornographic sites may make others uncomfortable, or it could also be used to harass female colleagues. But the question also arises of how many people have access to private spaces... Also, if other work like activism done on public computers offends some people, we think it's okay. So, what makes us uneasy about pornography? Is it merely an assertion of our personal standards?



If all things were equal, then maybe we would have no problems, but things being the way they are, pornography can and is used as a tool to harass women. As a person working in an office, I feel threatened and violated if male colleagues watch pornography. When pornographic sites pop up on my screen, is it a mistake, 'their personal matter', or harassment of women colleagues like me? As a female boss, I could feel threatened bringing up such a discussion even as an administrative issue with male subordinates.

When we talk of 'indecent' representation, how do we define indecent? Won't any norms we try and set be contradictory to our stand of freedom of expression? And then there is indecent representation in advertisements, films, soaps, and writings.....

Someone said,  
**"Porn vs. Erotica = Lesbian Sex vs. Real Sex"**  
What do you think???

The argument of objectification of body parts, the complete de-intellectualisation of sex and sexuality is also problematic. Are we saying that seeing a butt, a breast or whatever else just as that - for pleasure - is objectionable in and of itself? Can we define for others what's objectionable or not?

**What kind of alternative sexual exposure is available to many apart from pornography and that really hilarious piece of work called the Kamasutra!**  
We couldn't think of much apart from sex education books (which also some people could call pornography except for the fact that they have a 'social purpose' of educating children about 'life!'). Also, agony aunt columns are very popular....many people get their thrills from them. Do they become pornography?

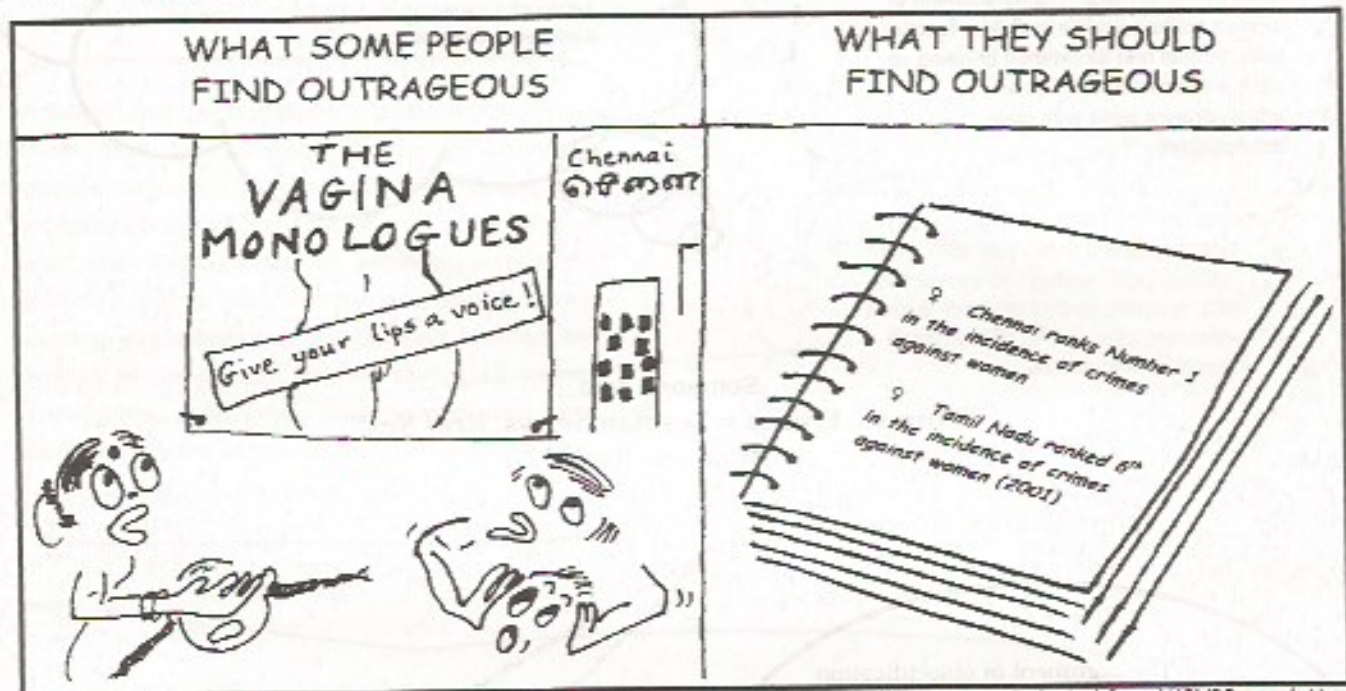
What of the problems that exist with mainstream representation that creates a certain kind of lopsided sexuality? The aggressive male sexuality, the submissive female sexuality... Is pornography responsible for creating all this? Or like all other mediums, is pornography too influenced by inequalities that already exist, and in fact shaped by or capitalising on them? So if we had a better understanding of sexuality, if gender inequalities were absent and exploitation controlled, would pornography be 'better', or even cease to exist?





## BAN IT?!

A lot of people think that a ban is the answer to the 'menace' of pornography. Do we agree with that? In these times of cable television and the internet, what would such a ban mean? At the same time, in India, we are living in an era of repressive control and tightening norms of censorship and/or monitoring. So how does such a position against pornography contradict our position on the right to talk about sexuality (across supposedly established "moral" boundaries)? If we ourselves seek for freedom of expression to be curbed, who would get targeted first? What would happen to a lot of gay and lesbian literature which could be sexually explicit in nature?



"adapted from WGNRR newsletter"

### ~ Ensler Speaks the "V" Word ~

*"there's so much darkness and secrecy surrounding vaginas - like the Bermuda Triangle - Nobody ever reports back from there."*

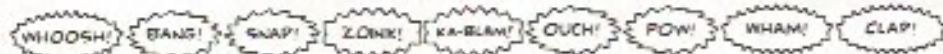
*"Vagina Monologues was banned in Chennai because the police said the play could lead to the deterioration of law and order problems besides causing breach of public peace. It's funny to think of all these vaginas - big & small - running around the streets of Chennai disrupting public order!"*

An interesting aspect was that most of us in the discussions had never actively sought pornography or come across any hardcore sexually explicit material but yet seemed to be against it. Such discomfort is an arena that needs further exploration. What are our ideas about sex without love and emotion? What is 'private' and sacred and what makes us define that?

Many of the arguments against pornography also stem from the assumption that only men derive pleasure from it (women's bodies for male pleasure). While it may be true that the industry caters to men and very little may actually be made for the female gaze and pleasure, isn't there a possibility that women may also want sexual titillation, and some who have the access and choice may also be enjoying it? To assume that women could never like or respond to pornography is akin to the assumption that women are sexually passive or asexual... an idea many of us reject vociferously.

In fact, we talked of each person's right to their own mode of sexual expression, as long as it is consensual. We also discussed some areas of discomfort: Child abuse, the use of pornography against anyone's will, pornographic material produced under coercion and other such forms of exploitation.

We feel there is a need for the women's movement to engage with these issues afresh, with renewed insights, and take account of newer circumstances and technology. And not least, this engagement needs to be carried out with a good dose of humour - a quality at premium amongst many of us!







## CAMPAIGN AGAINST CENSORSHIP

### 'Miff'ing the authorities with documentary films at Vikalp!

If it seems dramatic to say that we live in repressive times, when one of the most important pillars of democracy, 'freedom of speech' is threatened, here is a quick timecheck. In an increasing trend over the last few years, government agencies, government officials and the 'public' have taken to increasingly becoming a moral police and/or a censor board at will - of art and artists, of academics and archeology, of life and lifestyle. If the 'activists' of the Hindu brigade effectively 'stopped' the shooting and screening of films like Water and Fire, and exhibitions of MF Hussain and SAHMAT, the state government of Uttar Pradesh attacked HIV/AIDS activists of an NGO for the 'indecent' of possessing sexually explicit material and condoms on their premises, and fundamentalists under the pretext of enforcing the "burkha diktat", have terrorised and killed girls in the Kashmir valley.

In November 2003, the Left Front Government of West Bengal banned Dwikhandita (Split in Two, 2003) by Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin. Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee said: "I've read the book, not once but several times. I've discussed the contents with 25 people who matter and have finally decided to proscribe it". The Home Secretary, Amit Kiran Deb, said that if the book were not banned, "it could ignite communal tension". In January 2004, over 150 activists of the little-known 'Sambhaji Brigade', affiliated to the Maratha Seva Sangh attacked the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in Pune, ransacked the renowned institute, mutilated rare oil paintings and tore pages of books and manuscripts dating back to the 16th century. All this because the institute 'helped American author James Laine, who made some highly objectionable remarks' about Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in his book: "Shivaji: A Hindu king in Islamic India". In March 2004, the Police Commissioner of Chennai banned the performance of a play called Vagina Monologues by American playwright, Eve Ensler which has performed to 2,300 packed shows in 1,100 cities across the world & raised over \$20 million for women. The ban was on the grounds that after going through the script of the play, he found certain portions of it "objectionable," and added that as per the Tamil Nadu Dramatic Performance Act of 1954, the play, if staged, could "lead to the deterioration of law and order problems besides causing breach of public peace".

While all these were dramatic events widely covered in the media, something else was happening rather quietly. The Films Division (FD) brought in a tiny clause that stipulated censor certification as a pre-condition for the participation of Indian documentary and short films at the Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF). What followed however was quite a storm, for film festivals are spaces where the international norm is that films will be displayed in their original cut. This norm has been established to respect the film makers right to free and unfettered expression, and to create a space where audiences can engage with national and international issues, unmediated by local criteria of censorship. So, the FD demand for a censor certificate is discriminatory and put the Indian entries at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the foreign entries which did not need to be censored.

Of course, the first line of defence that the FD resorted to was that they were only 'responding to such requests from women's groups'. Yet, as the Campaign Against Censorship that came into being to respond to the FD's actions, it was clear that women's groups were only the pretext for a definite political agenda. A joint statement by women's groups including Saheli stated quite unequivocally that, "As women's groups, we would like to remind you that documentaries made by the Indian film making community have reflected our issues and concerns, highlighted women's situation in society and strengthened the struggle for gender justice. Like many other peoples' movements in the country, we believe that a vibrant and independent documentary movement is an important social component of a country that claims to ensure 'freedom of expression' (in this case of the film makers), and 'freedom of information' (of audiences).

In the face of a growing campaign by documentary filmmakers from across the country, and the threat of a boycott that would internationally embarrass them, the FD withdrew its 'censorship clearance' criteria. But what followed was censorship through the backdoor. In a 'selection process' fraught with inconsistency and lack of transparency, the FD rejected a disproportionate number of films made by members of the Campaign Against Censorship - films on the Gujarat carnage and communalism, films that questioned current processes of development and inequity, films that reflected the culture of protest and resistance in the country, films that have won acclaim and recognition in various film festivals all over the world.

The brazen manner in which the Government of India carried out its agenda was appalling to many. In response, stalwarts like Girish Karnad withdrew as jury members of the festival, some Indian and international filmmakers withdrew their entries, while others used the platform at MIFF to question the misuse of public funds and office to throttle the voice of the people. And at the same time, across the road in Mumbai a vibrant film festival came into being: Vikalp - Films for Freedom, Freedom for Films. 58 films that celebrated the spirit of free speech, viewed by eager thousands who recognised that the only way to counter both censorship and hate speech of communal forces is to circulate more speech. Clearly, the challenges to free speech have only just begun to come out into the open. Today, a travelling version of the festival, T-Vikalp is reaching out to audiences all over the country. If you'd like a screening in your city, contact us in Saheli and we'll put you in touch with someone in your city!