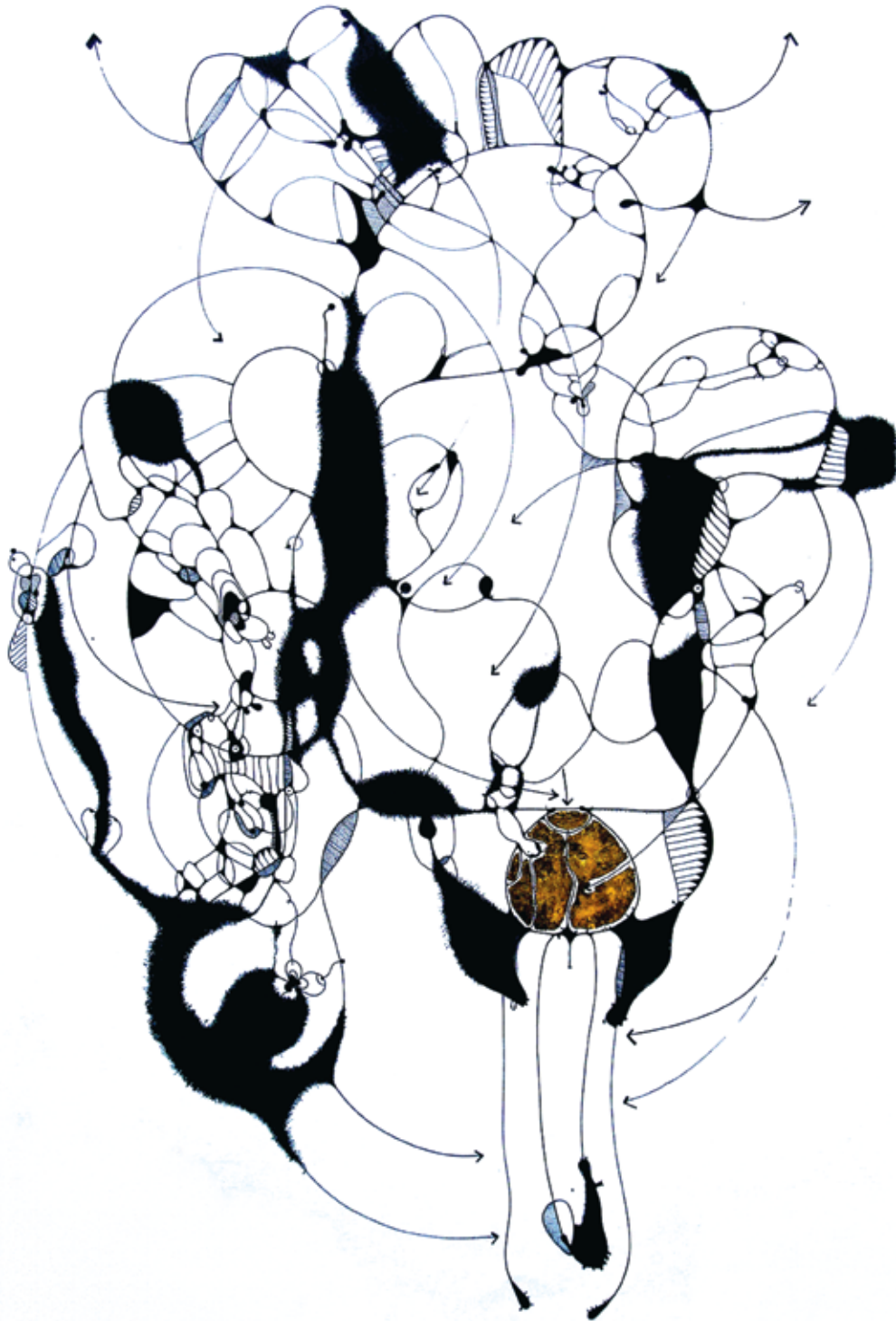


in plainspeak

TALKING ABOUT *sexuality* IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

2009, Issue 2



letter from editor / radhika chandiramani / 2

who we are / 3

interview / the woman question / shireen pervin huq / 4

issue in focus / FEAR AND LOATHING IN INCEST / anonymous / 14

shades of grey / CONCEIVING SEXUAL AGENCY / adnan hossain / 20

art space / WORKS ON PAPER AND CANVAS / pratibha singh / 26

the bigger picture / GROPING IN THE DARK / veronica george / 32

reel review / LARS AND THE REAL GIRL / bishakha datta / 36

hot off the press / WHAT THESE HANDS CAN DO / germaine trittle p leonin / 40

'I' column / HELL HOUSE / pranaadhika sinha / 42

did you know? / CAN DO BAR & CABBAGES AND CONDOMS RESTAURANT / 44

campaign spotlight / DELHI PRIDE PARADE / 46

at the resource centre / 52

Welcome to this issue of *In Plainspeak*.

We celebrate the positive decision of the Delhi High Court on reading down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, with pictures of the 2009 Pride Parade that took place just four days before the decision was read in court. Thanks to Aditya Bondyopadhyay for sharing his photographs with *In Plainspeak*.

We are pleased to bring to you the voice of Shireen Pervin Huq in an extremely thought-provoking interview. In a fascinating account, Shireen tells us about the politics of language, and of how in the beginning, 'important men' spoke on behalf of the women's movement in Bangladesh, rather than women themselves! It is thankfully, a very different Movement now.

From Bangladesh again, Adnan Hossain questions whether homophobia is the only way to explain the oppression of people who do not conform to gender and sexuality norms. What happens when 'homophobia', class, Islam, and rights meet?

Against the backdrop of the furore over sexuality education in India, Veronica George muses on why it is needed. Highlighting one of the many reasons why sexuality education is crucial not just for young people but also for

those supposedly taking care of them, this time's Issue in Focus is incest. An anonymous contributor writes about her experience of and recovery from it. We also have the I column focus on child sexual abuse from a slightly different angle. Child sexual abuse (CSA) is often assumed to be a heterosexual act. Here is a brave account of same sex child sexual abuse by Pranaadhika Sinha who runs an NGO on CSA and incest awareness/support.

Germaine Trittle P Leonin reviews a book of lesbian short stories, essays, and poems from the Philippines and Bishakha Datta reviews a film on a very special relationship between a young man and a life-sized anatomically correct doll. No, not the kind that you are thinking of!

We are grateful to Pratibha Singh for allowing us to use her art works. There is an interesting story behind them.

Please do keep sending in your contributions and feedback to resourcecentre@tarshi.net.

Stay well, loved, and happy.



Radhika Chandiramani
Executive Director

The South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality is hosted by TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues) in New Delhi, India. TARSHI is an NGO that believes that all people have a right to sexual wellbeing and a self-affirming and enjoyable sexuality. TARSHI works on sexuality without restricting it to a disease-prevention, violence against women or sexual minorities framework, but rather from an affirmative and rights-based approach. TARSHI has been operating a telephone helpline on sexuality since 1996. It also conducts trainings and institutes on sexuality and rights, develops publications for diverse audiences and engages in public education and advocacy. For more information on our programmes and events, please visit www.tarshi.net

The Resource Centre aims to increase knowledge and scholarship on issues of sexuality, sexual health and sexual well being in this region. It specifically focuses on sexuality related work in China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, The Philippines, and Vietnam.

The Resource Centre has developed a range of programmes to enhance scholarship, increase access to information, and further dialogue on sexuality issues. Check out our website (www.tarshi.net). It hosts online moderated discussions on sexuality, news and announcements from the region and links to resources on sexuality. You can also download an electronic version of In Plainspeak. A Directory of Institute Alumni is also available on the website. It provides information about human resources available in the region and also provides alumni with a sense of solidarity/ community. The Fifth Regional Institute on Sexuality, Society and Culture was held on May 11–18, 2009 in New Delhi, India. The Institute hosted 20 participants from eight countries in South and Southeast Asia: Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan and The Philippines. Contact us at resourcecentre@tarshi.net

the woman question

Shireen Pervin Huq is an active member of the women's movement in Bangladesh for over 25 years and a founder member of Naripokkho. For 20 years Shireen has worked for the Danish development assistance programme in Bangladesh, first as the Adviser Women's Development and later as the Deputy Programme Coordinator for the Human Rights and Good Governance Programme. She has also done training on Gender, Rights and Development in Bangladesh as well as other parts of the world.



SHIREEN PERVIN HUQ

PLEASE TELL US ABOUT NARIPOKKHO? WHEN DID IT START? WHERE DID THE NEED FOR SUCH AN ORGANIZATION ARISE FROM?

Naripokkho was founded in May 1983. A group of us Bangladeshi women engaged in various capacities with questions of social change and development agreed at the end of a three day workshop on the need for an organised space within which the ‘woman question’ could be raised, debated, analysed and addressed without prejudice or dogma. At the time the ‘woman question’ was largely relegated to a residual category of social welfare and development or at best it was a polemical gesture on the sidelines of party politics.

Bangladesh was not even 12 years old; it was still evolving both politically and economically with few women visibly participating. One exception being the hundreds of women recruited to serve the mission of rural reconstruction and development, which was by and large implemented by international and national NGOs supported by foreign aid. Many international organizations accompanied the large influx of aid and assistance that was given to the newly independent Bangladesh by the international community. This was a world unto itself, by no means homogenous but generally characterized by a motivation to rebuild the war torn country and help the poor. It is broadly in this context, that we felt the need for a ‘third view’ on the

woman question: one that would be based on the different realities and lived experiences of Bangladeshi women. Discrimination was the first fundamental in articulating a new position where women would speak for themselves, rejecting both the charitable view of social organizations and political parties as well as the instrumentalist view of development agencies; a position that would clearly align itself with the notions of freedom, dignity and equality. For many, including in the women’s movement such an articulation was too radical and violated norms of propriety appropriate to the nationalist construct of the Bengali woman.

YES, IT MUST HAVE SEEMED RADICAL THEN. WHAT WERE THE REACTIONS? WHAT WERE YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN BANGLADESH?

If I am to speak of my experience of the women’s movement in Bangladesh then it is primarily the experience I have had as a member of Naripokkho. Personally, the first shock I had took place within a few months of forming Naripokkho when a number of women commented on our very first slogan “*nari shomaj rukhey darao*” (women resist!). “It is too belligerent,” they said.

The second major shock came in 1985 when a nation-wide movement was being waged against violence against women. I was shocked at how leaders of the women’s

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movement put forward 'important men' as spokespersons in public meetings. I sensed an apprehension or fear that the movement must not appear to be against men! This was difficult for me to digest, when I felt strongly that the movement should have a female face and a female voice. I can cite so many more examples of encountering what was a combination of social conservatism and a general lack of analysis of violence against women as a phenomenon based on deep rooted cultural beliefs about the inferiority of women and the unequal power relations women and men

are embedded in. This has definitely changed over the years. The 'mainstream', if I may use this term as a shorthand for the more established women's organisations, has since engaged in the analysis, and at least as far as violence against women is concerned, the language of the movement has shifted to reflect a more systemic understanding of unequal gender relations and its ideological implications. We still have problems with the manner in which the issue is presented at times, but we have sufficient common ground to work together in the fight against violence against women.

PLEASE GIVE US SOME EXAMPLES OF HOW THE LANGUAGE OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT HAS SHIFTED IN ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.

Referring to a woman who has been raped as "*dhorshita*", which literally translates in to 'the raped one', makes the rape an attribute of her character and identity. We prefer to use "*dhorshoner sheekar nari*" which means a woman who has been subjected to rape. The rape is clearly external to her; it is a crime that has been committed against her. This distinction in language makes no difference to the legal prosecution against the perpetrator, but it signals a different message as to whose burden it is. We know that in most societies women carry the burden of rape. It is imposed on her by society as well as her near and dear ones, and she herself internalises a sense of shame, guilt and worthlessness. Shifting the language we use is part of the struggle to change that.

Similarly referring to sexual assault and rape as "*shombhrom hani or izzat hani*", which means loss of chastity or honour of the woman, her family and the nation, not only detracts from rape as a crime but also fails to place the burden of dishonour on the perpetrator. Even war crimes such as the rapes committed by the Pakistan army in 1971 during our freedom struggle are often talked about in terms of "*amader ma boner shombhrom hani*" meaning the loss of honour of our mothers and sisters.

There is a tendency by even educated and socially aware women and men to use the term "*maa-bon*" (mothers-

sisters) to refer to women. Referring to women as “*maabon*” is symptomatic of a ‘protectionist’ approach to women and denies them their identity as fellow citizens. The politics of language has thus acquired great importance to us in Naripokkho.

HAS THERE BEEN A TRANSITION IN THE ISSUES THAT THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN BANGLADESH HAS ENGAGED WITH SO FAR OR IN THE APPROACHES USED?

In 1987 when we started a discussion on reproductive rights, the ‘mainstream’ which was configured at the time as *Oikkoboddho Nari Shomaj* (United Women’s Society), a coalition of nearly 20 women’s organisations, refused to include it in their list of demands. Reproductive health and even reproductive rights is now very much on the mainstream agenda. The involvement with the ICPD process contributed greatly to that change.

In 1991 when Naripokkho organised the first meeting of women’s organisations with sex workers, there was a curious response. Some of the women leaders were surprised how alike we looked! It was another 8 years before a show of solidarity between women’s organisations and sex workers fighting eviction threats could be achieved. This too had to be carefully crafted so that we spoke of the rights of sex workers as citizens and we spoke of their human rights, but as an organisation we avoided articulating a position on sex work itself.

WHAT IS THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT’S ENGAGEMENT WITH ISSUES OF SEXUALITY?

The engagement with issues of sexuality has not yet acquired a place in the agenda of the women’s movement in Bangladesh. Even in my own organisation Naripokkho we have for the longest time relegated it to the occasional discussion or spurts of heightened activism as happened during the movement against the eviction of sex workers. Of course there has been a sustained effort on the part of Naripokkho to not only express solidarity with sex workers but to extend concrete support as in facilitating

the formation of Ulka, the first sex workers organisation in Bangladesh, and Shonghoti, an alliance of NGOs to support the human rights of sex workers. Naripokkho continues to extend support through Shonghoti although it has long since stepped aside from a leadership role.

A more sustained effort is being made now within Naripokkho to integrate issues of sexuality and sexual rights on a broader frame and enhance our own understanding of rights work. Naripokkho organised a special workshop on *Narir Jouno Jibon o Odhikar Bodh* (Woman’s Sexual Life and Sense of Rights) at the 3rd National Conference of Women’s Organisations held in January 2008. This workshop generated huge interest among the representatives of more than 550 women’s organisations who participated in the conference. We have plans to take the discussion forward with Doorbar (the national network of women’s organisations) members in order to build a broad based activism around sexual rights issues.

The students of Jahangir Nagar University have led a ten year long movement against sexual harassment in campus and in May 2009 won a major victory in another landmark judgement from the High Court whereby government has been instructed to enact appropriate legislation and till then ensure that employers and educational institutions abide by the guidelines issued. Women’s organisations expressed their solidarity with this movement, and in fact the first initiative towards a policy to address sexual harassment was jointly taken by Naripokkho and Women for Women in 1998 soon after the first agitation against sexual harassment by students at the University of Dhaka.

PLEASE TELL US ABOUT THE HISTORIC MOMENTS INCLUDING THE SLOGAN ‘MY BODY, MY DECISION’ IN THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY CAMPAIGN IN 1994 AND THE LANDMARK JUDGEMENT IN 1999 DECLARING EVICTIONS OF SEX WORKERS AS ILLEGAL.

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The slogan “*shoreer amaar, shiddhanto amaar*” (My Body, My Decision) was initially used to give expression to our work on reproductive rights and as a statement about the right to bodily integrity. . . . The backlash was predictable. Journalists asked snidely if we were promoting “free sex”. Nasreen retorted on one occasion, “...it simply means I will decide who I will sleep with and when”.

bodily integrity. We decided to go public with the slogan in March 1994. During 1993-94 Naripokkho had under the dynamic leadership of Nasreen Huq engaged intensively with the ICPD process, both the inter-governmental process as well as the NGO activities and at all levels, i.e. international, regional, national and local (grass roots) levels. It seemed like an appropriate opportunity to go public with the slogan. The backlash was predictable. Journalists asked snidely if we were promoting “free sex”. Nasreen retorted on one occasion, “...it simply means I will decide who I will sleep with and when”.

The High Court verdict on the writ petition filed by a number of organisations including Naripokkho to challenge the eviction of the brothels in Tanbazaar and Nimali in Narayanganj was a landmark judgement in that it declared the eviction illegal and recognised sex work as an occupation. However, the verdict in itself meant little

for the hundreds of displaced women and children as the verdict did not include reinstatement of the brothel and its residents and made no specific provision for enforcement. It was undoubtedly a moral victory and subsequently the verdict was used to pre-empt further evictions. Eviction threats in Patuakhali, Jessore, Tangail, etc could be thwarted because of the mobilisation of Doorbar members who felt that the verdict strengthened their position in claiming protection from local administration and police.

However, in my opinion the major gain was made during the six weeks of 24 hours activism when the print media provided front page coverage and the term “*jouna kormi*” (sex worker) became common currency instead of the traditionally used derogatory term “*potita*” (the fallen one). During this time women and human rights activists marched together with sex workers, held demonstrations in front of the office of the Inspector General of Police, Department of Social Welfare and the United Nations resident mission, walked in to government offices and held meetings and press conferences. The mobilisation was unprecedented. A total of 86 non-government organisations working on women’s rights, human rights, development, etc formed Shonghoti, an alliance to support the human rights of sex workers.

It is during this movement that Naripokkho made its acquaintance with inter-sex groups, in particular the group that called itself Badhon Hijra Shongho. I think it changed the face of the women’s movement to some extent, or at least a part of the women’s movement. Who were these bold and uninhibited women at the head of the march? I would like to believe that they made it possible for many of us to also be a little less inhibited in public spaces. Most importantly for us it gave meaning to the term sexual diversity and at least for Naripokkho it has changed forever our idea of who we are. Joya¹ and Kotha² are now part of every thing we do and every event we organise.

Naripokkho was forced to engage in some self-examination when Badhon Hijra Shongho applied for membership in Doorbar, the national network of women’s organisations initiated by Naripokkho. The decision to include inter-sex people in the network was another watershed in the history

of the Bangladesh women's movement. This happened prior to the 2nd National Conference of Women's organisations in 2002 at the end of an interesting debate about whether a *hijra* organisation could be identified as a women's organisation or not. Joya asked, "If I identify with being a woman, who are you to tell me I am not?" Both 'sex' and 'gender' had to be redefined....

PLEASE TELL US ABOUT THE CHALLENGES YOU FACED IN THE INCLUSION OF THE RIGHTS OF SEX WORKERS IN THE DIALOGUE ON SEXUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN.

In fact, for us the issue of sex workers rights preceded any organised dialogue on sexual rights for women. Discussions on sex work and sex workers facilitated the opening of that space. The resistance to the inclusion of the rights of sex workers in the women's movement agenda came primarily from people, including women's groups, who considered sex work to be immoral and a public health hazard. Views about what constituted 'rehabilitation' were at two opposite ends; for most rehabilitation meant a sewing machine and at best marriage whereas sex workers articulated clearly that rehabilitation could be nothing short of social acceptance. Whether sex work could be described as work was another major point of debate.

In 1997 the Kandupotti brothel in Dhaka was evicted by a horde of property speculators in the garb of religious sanctity. Prior to the eviction Mahbooba Mahmood Leena, another founder member of Naripokkho, and others had visited the brothel to learn about the conditions of women in sex work. During these visits they made the acquaintance of Momotaz a senior sex worker in the brothel. When the first eviction threats were made Momotaz along with others rushed to Naripokkho with a card that Leena had given them should they ever need to or want to contact us. Although Naripokkho members responded immediately, it was too late. The Kandupotti brothel had been demolished.

Naripokkho organised protests and press conferences against the eviction and invited other organisations to come and express their solidarity. Three organisations,

Views about what constituted 'rehabilitation' were at two opposite ends; for most rehabilitation meant a sewing machine and at best marriage whereas sex workers articulated clearly that rehabilitation could be nothing short of social acceptance.

Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition, Nari Maitree and CARE responded. Together with them Naripokkho started monthly meetings with the evicted sex workers to identify possible interventions. Naripokkho provided Momotaz with a year long internship which was supported by contributions from the Naripokkho membership.

This year long internship made it possible for Momotaz to work closely with Naripokkho and learn about organisation building. During this year Momotaz worked closely with Leena who was at the time heading a project to support the formation and establishment of Doorbar. They travelled together to visit Doorbar members in many different parts of Bangladesh. Samia Afrin and Jahanara Khatun, both members of Naripokkho and at the time employed in the Network Project held weekly meetings with Momotaz and her erstwhile colleagues from Kandupotti. The result at the end of the year was the formation of Ulka, the first sex workers organisation in Bangladesh. In 1999 when the troubles began in Tanbazaar, it was Momotaz who rushed to Naripokkho and urged us to get involved.

The inclusion of Ulka in Doorbar Network in 2000 was the first milestone in this regard. Doorbar members had to be convinced that a women's organisation could not be excluded from membership on grounds of their occupation.

... the discussion on sexuality and sexual rights requires us not only as part of the women's movement but as individual women to examine our own beliefs, practices and feelings; something that is not easy for everyone.

The members of the central committee gave in to Naripokkho's arguments in this regard and Ulka was made a member. However, the real resistance surfaced at the time of the first Doorbar elections in 2001 when Momotaz, with encouragement from Naripokkho, declared her intent to run for the President of the Dhaka *Ancha*³. Most members reacted saying how can we work under the leadership of a sex worker? Naripokkho organised an impromptu discussion on sex work for Doorbar members attending the general meeting. Only half were convinced. However, what ultimately contributed to the swing in her favour was when members from different regional committees, where Momotaz had accompanied Naripokkho during her internship, spoke up. These women knew about Momotaz's struggle and her leadership qualities. Momotaz won the election and from that day on it did not matter whether she was a sex worker or not.

HOW HAS THE INCLUSION OF INTER-SEX PEOPLE IN THE MOVEMENT INFLUENCED THE POLITICS OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN GENERAL AND NARIPOKKHO IN PARTICULAR?

The initial reaction by Doorbar members to the inclusion of Badhon Hijra Shongho for example was negative. However, our insistence on abiding by the principle of non-

discrimination irrespective of sexual identity prevailed and as Joya and Kotha and other *hijras* became familiar faces in our meetings and functions the prejudice and fear that many had gave way to acceptance and affection.

For many Naripokkho members it has opened our eyes to the diversity in women's lives and helped us accept difference with compassion and empathy. Sex workers have told us how the accidents of our birth, our marriages etc have determined who among us became sex workers.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE USEFUL POINTS OF LEARNING FOR YOU AND NARIPOKKHO IN THE COURSE OF YOUR WORK? WHAT HAVE BEEN THE POSSIBLE DETERRENTS?

The main learning has been how difficult it is to include sexual rights as a legitimate part of our struggle for emancipation, equality, etc. I suppose in a context where women's economic and political rights are yet to be realised, any attempt to raise sexual rights issues is easily sidelined as peripheral and or inconsequential. Besides, the discussion on sexuality and sexual rights requires us not only as part of the women's movement but as individual women to examine our own beliefs, practices and feelings; something that is not easy for everyone.

PLEASE TELL US ABOUT SHONGHOTI (ALLIANCE OF SEX WORKERS) AND BONDHON (ORGANISATION OF HIJRAS). WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF ALLIANCE BUILDING IN THE SOUTH ASIA REGION ON SEXUAL RIGHTS? WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE SCOPE FOR FUTURE WORK IN BANGLADESH OR COLLABORATION WITH OTHER NETWORKS, ORGANISATIONS AND COALITIONS ACROSS THE REGION?

Shonghoti represents a unique coming together of women's rights organisations, human rights organisations and development NGOs in support of a near untouchable group – sex workers. Of the 86 organisations that constituted Shonghoti, only three had programmatic work with sex

workers. The rest shared the outrage at the manner in which the government carried out the eviction of the Tanbazaar and Nimtali brothels. The unifying factor was the human rights violations. Many members of Shonghoti did not support sex workers per se, but were prepared to defend their rights as citizens. We were glad to have the numbers whatever the reason. Moreover, I feel that it is when people join a movement that they also learn to think differently and I know a lot of people today who have changed their earlier perspectives on sex work and sex workers.

At the time in July-August 1999 Shonghoti provided a dynamic show of strength and extended a very powerful voice to the demands of the evicted sex workers. Nowadays Naripokkho is in the background, as there are many sex workers organisations now and they have formed their own network. Shonghoti's role has also changed over the years. I think what Shonghoti did was open many doors for the sex workers organisations. Now they don't need us to open doors. I remember at the 1st International Anti-trafficking Conference in Dhaka, I was sitting next to a sex worker friend and she was annoyed that the proceedings were in English which she could not understand. She asked me to tell the organisers to provide simultaneous translation. I said firmly that she had to do it herself. Hazera got up and asked "Why have you invited us if the meeting is going to be conducted in a language we cannot understand"? It worked.

Sex workers themselves have learnt the skills of movement work – how to write a press release, how to run a press conference, how to organise a meeting, how to mobilise, etc. Naripokkho provided some of that through the close mentoring of Momotaz and the leadership provided in the initial days of Shonghoti. Sex workers had to accompany Naripokkho members to different government and NGO offices, address press conferences, etc.

Our role has definitely changed. But we are there when they need us. For example, when the brothel in Tangail was attacked two years ago Samia Afrin and Kamrun Nahar from Naripokkho rushed there with Doorbar members from Dhaka. Local Doorbar members were already involved with the sex workers in resisting the attack by

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a self-appointed committee to 'cleanse' Tangail and many sustained physical injuries during this attack.

Naripokkho and CARE have facilitated linkages between sex workers organisations in Bangladesh and Durbar Mahila Shommonoy Committee in Kolkata, India and we have participated in the big festival they organised for International Sex Workers Day (3 March). We have seen that this kind of exchange can be empowering for sex workers who are not only at the bottom of our society in 'moral' terms, but also restricted in their physical movements. I remember Nasreen telling me about the experience of pasting hand written posters in public spaces in Narayanganj at the height of the Tanbazaar movement. The few sex workers who joined the Naripokkho members

The NGO-isation of movement work has made it possible for many to have paid employment in work that supports movement building etc. I don't know if this has been a good development or not and whether we should stop bemoaning the end of voluntarism and accept the practical resolution between livelihood needs and one's 'mission in life'. People are lucky if they can be paid to do movement work.

and Shonghoti activists in this protest activity were feeling very inhibited and nervous as they had never done anything so public! Many sex workers had never ventured out of their brothels. The first time they joined the International Women's Day march in 1992 was a major breakthrough for them. It opened up a whole other world for them and gave them a sense of freedom and the feeling of a rightful place in the women's movement.

Undoubtedly, such alliance building be it within Bangladesh as happened with Shonghoti or across borders gives strength to one of the most marginalized groups of women to claim a rightful place in society and their identity as citizens.

The kinds of alliance/exchanges that we have avoided even though they have been instrumental in opening up space

for different/diverse sexualities are the HIV/AIDS and anti-trafficking fora. The framing of sexual rights issues either within a disease framework or a crime framework makes it difficult to go beyond the discussion of abuse.

PLEASE TELL US MORE ABOUT YOURSELF. HOW DID YOU START THE WORK YOU DO?

I was a research student when I got involved with the founding of Naripokkho. I was back in Bangladesh to do my fieldwork for a Ph.D in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex, but got distracted by the beginning of Naripokkho among other more exciting things. Later in 1987 I took up a full time job as a development advisor to Danida (Danish International Development Agency). Except for a two year unpaid leave during 2001-2002 I put in more than the 40 hour week until December 2006 when I left for personal reasons. My engagement with Naripokkho is on a voluntary basis. At the time of joining Danida I made my involvement with Naripokkho clear and whenever I had to use day time work hours for something urgent at Naripokkho I either took leave or compensated with overtime work. Because I was such a workaholic I was putting in extra hours at Danida anyway, so my weekends and evenings and holidays were frequently used up for Naripokkho. For the most part I was lucky not to have a 'triple day' as I lived with my mother and sister who provided not only unstilted support for everything I wanted to do but took care of many of the practical things like household management and childcare etc. They were also my greatest inspiration to carry on. My sister, of course, was a comrade in the movement, a fellow fighter in Naripokkho, my confidante and a mother to my son. My mother and my sister made it possible for example to provide shelter in our home to several sex workers after the Tanbazaar eviction.

WHEW! WHAT ABOUT BURN OUT?

Actually, now I realise the cost of those long hours of work and how it has affected me in terms of burn-out. In those days most people within the movement had to put in that kind of work because of the necessity of having a

livelihood as well as being involved in movement work. The NGO-isation of movement work has made it possible for many to have paid employment in work that supports movement building etc. I don't know if this has been a good development or not and whether we should stop bemoaning the end of voluntarism and accept the practical resolution between livelihood needs and one's 'mission in life'. People are lucky if they can be paid to do movement work.

Of course my job at Danida, a bilateral aid agency, and my work in Naripokkho was not poles apart. As Adviser, Women's Development I was often able to advance different parts of the women's movement agenda. I was, for example, instrumental in the design and installation of the Government of Bangladesh's Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women (MSP-VAW), a programme to put in place comprehensive services for violence survivors. I was able to use my position in a bilateral agency to leverage the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to undertake the piloting of the MSP-VAW. The ideas and the inspiration to do so came from being part of Naripokkho and the women's movement in Bangladesh and in particular my acquaintance with Shanthi Dairiam of IRAW Asia Pacific through whom I had learnt about similar work in Malaysia.

WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING?

I don't think I'm really going anymore (*laughs*)... Naripokkho and I keep each other going...

1. Joya Sikdar is one of the founders of Badhon Hijra Shongho and the current president of the Sex Workers Network of Bangladesh
2. Evan Ahmed Kotha is also a member of Badhon Hijra Shongho
3. Doorbar Network is at present organized in to 16 *Anchals* (Regions) in Bangladesh.

**fear
and
loathing
in incest**

ANONYMOUS

His amiable face he saved for the outside world, but at home he was sullen and withdrawn and played hardly any role in my or my brother's upbringing. It was after his first drink that he was a changed man. He'd play music, tell stories, want to dance, cook, call friends over and have us kids stay up late with him.

A spate of reports in the media in the last few months, of cases of incest coming to light, has sparked outrage and fear among parents all over the country. Perhaps the horrific story of the monster dad from Austria has added to this fear...a fear that such madness exists in our children's world; a fear that children are not safe anywhere, not even in their own homes; a fear that such monsters may live inside of each one of us.

Incest is a nebulously defined, uncomfortably-fit-in offence that is dealt with under the laws relating to rape (Section 375 of the IPC), sexual molestation of women (Section 354) and sodomy (Section 377). The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 which one hoped would deal effectively with child sexual abuse too disappoints in this area.

The problem with incest is that its very definition makes it an offence hard to expose, to investigate and to secure a

conviction for. Added to that is the inadequate awareness of the prevalence of the crime and its consequences upon the lives of children.

RAHI (Recovering and Healing from Incest) a Delhi based NGO, in its findings¹ describes incest very inclusively. Here 'incest' or 'child sexual abuse' includes exploitative sexual activity, whether or not it involves physical contact, between a child and another person, who by virtue of his power over the child due to age, strength, position, or relationship used the child to meet his own sexual and emotional needs. The act, though sexual in nature, is also about the abuse of power and the betrayal of trust, because the offender completely disregards the child's own developmental immaturity and inability to understand sexual behaviour².

As a survivor of incest, I felt a tremendous sense of liberation when I came across this understanding. Growing

up, it seemed to me that all the victims of such crimes were simply horrified children who had passively endured or struggled against the acts of the adult.

RAHI explains how a child's need for nurture, touch, care and caressing are not the same as an adult's sexual desires. I had a father who was a successful surgeon and who was very popular with his patients and friends. What many could not see was that he had extremely low self-esteem and was a chronic alcoholic.

His amiable face he saved for the outside world, but at home he was sullen and withdrawn and played hardly any role in

to think back, the emotion I felt the strongest would have to be a sense of conflict.

This was the first time that I had received this much attention from my father. He told me I was beautiful. He asked if his touch excited me. I told him it didn't but that was not true; it did. And it shamed me too. I wanted it to stop, but I loved the interest he was showing in me.

The movies disturbed me and I noticed that they seemed to incite him further, but at the same time I was burning with curiosity and would peek at the television screen from under my blanket.

I do not know which I hated more: the return to boarding school with a drunken father who would make passes at the seniors in school, or the dread of going home to my room whose door had no lock.

my or my brother's upbringing. It was after his first drink that he was a changed man. He'd play music, tell stories, want to dance, cook, call friends over and have us kids stay up late with him.

It did make us a little uneasy, but it was also so thrilling to be allowed to stay up late and be a part of the party that happened every single night. As mood changes of insobriety go, jocose would soon give way to bellicose, then morose and finally comatose.

When I was eight years old and my brother was a year younger, my mother had to go out of town for a week and we kids were left at home with Dad in charge. Initially the thrill and unease both escalated as we were allowed to stay up as late as we wanted, chat and watch movies with him. He also insisted we sleep in his room.

Then from the second night onwards, after my brother fell asleep, there was more talk, more movies – this time pornography, and touching and kissing. I'd pretend to be asleep or would act as if I was not interested, but if I were

Somehow by the end of the week I just wanted to be a child again and be clean. I knew everything would be okay again once my mother returned. And she finally did.

I rushed to hug her, crying with relief and told her what happened. Her reaction was not at all what I expected. She was silent for a while, and then asked if I was sure all that I was saying was true. She believed that I had a vivid imagination and tended to exaggerate things.

I suppose I was hurt and shocked but those feelings were clearly suppressed or forgotten. I do remember that I began to wonder whether I did make this all up and decided that maybe it was not so big a deal after all.

A few years later my mother had to move to another city for two years to study and I insisted that I be allowed to move into the boarding house at my school. I do not know if it was my father or me that I did not trust.

We tried it for a year; my father would pick me up every Friday and I'd spend the weekend at home with him and

our old nanny and return Sunday evenings. My brother was not allowed home as often.

I do not know which I hated more: the return to boarding school with a drunken father who would make passes at the seniors in school, or the dread of going home to my room whose door had no lock.

By then my feelings towards him were those of dislike. But amazingly, my fear would turn into anger when he tottered into my room at night. I'd shove him out and barricade the door. I knew then that he was never ever going to touch me again.

I was probably falling into what Dr Shekhar Sheshadri, psychiatrist at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Bangalore called the 'the survivor's cycle'³ which describes the violation of a sexually abused child's physical, emotional and mental state.

I was eighteen when I learnt that over 50 percent of children in India have been sexually abused. More specifically, here are some of the figures relating to Indian children in the age group of 5-12 years⁴:

- 53.22% of children have faced one or more forms of sexual abuse

I felt wretched inside each time I found myself singing or speaking on stage or in front of the class. I hated myself for being chosen prefect or captain, even as I loved being one. As for boys, I was so sure they were only interested in me because I was cheap and slutty that I would never respond, but I was secretly elated.

I found out several years later that he had molested several other women, including my cousins, maids, friends and patients. That knowledge at least convinced me that I had not made up what happened to me.

What did bother me though was the attention I was starting to attract. I was sociable, a performer and a natural leader.

I felt wretched inside each time I found myself singing or speaking on stage or in front of the class. I hated myself for being chosen prefect or captain, even as I loved being one. As for boys, I was so sure they were only interested in me because I was cheap and slutty that I would never respond, but I was secretly elated.

When I was fourteen I was molested by a friendly stranger at the bus stop. I pulled away and ran home but could not shake the feeling that I had somehow asked for that.

- Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar and Delhi reported the highest percentage of sexual abuse among both boys and girls
- 50% abuses are by persons known to the child or in a position of trust and responsibility
- Most children do not report the matter to anyone

I think the first step in my healing process came with the knowledge that I was not alone. I began to understand also that I was simply not capable of giving consent, let alone enticing the adults who committed the abuse into doing what they did. The shame began to lessen.

My next step was to build my self esteem. I began analysing my choices, making new ones that gave me control over my life. I pursued spirituality and through it discovered how to let go of the past and how to feel strong within myself.

I was able to look after my father while he was on his deathbed without revulsion or hatred. I volunteered to do this because I felt I had healed more than my mother or brother who had to endure his alcoholism.

I realize that my journey has been long, I sometimes still question if I'm reacting to a person in a particular way because of any impact my father may have had on me. I wonder if I still might have unresolved issues that a professional might be able to recognize. But mostly, I feel strong, peaceful, happy and grateful for the life I have today.

Exit.

Exeunt. To quietly exult.

Today organisations like RAHI and Childline are doing much to give a hearing to abused children or their caregivers who have knowledge of this abuse and feel helpless in the face of societal pressures.

Slowly state machinery too is waking up to the reality of and the complications involved in cases of incest. In a recent judgment of the Delhi High Court, Justice Murlidhar, while dismissing the appeal of 54-year-old Tara Dutt, who

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Dr Shekhar Seshadri speaks of the Exit Cycle⁵ which allows one to reclaim one's life. These are steps to self-acceptance and resolution of the consequences of sexual abuse in one's childhood. They include:

- Empowerment.
The sexual abuse was not my fault.
- Survival Skills.
I can be myself to myself and others.
- Clarity.
I can separate who I am from what I have thought and felt about myself because of being abused.
- Self-awareness.
I value my thoughts and feelings. I can make mistakes, learn new things, be flexible and appreciate myself.
- Self-acceptance.
I know, like and respect myself. I am strong and able to learn and change. I deserve to be loved and respected by others.

was convicted of committing digital rape on a five-year-old relative in 1996 expressed concern at the absence of stricter laws to deal with sexual abuse of children.

He also made reference to the Law Commission's report on sexual abuse, whose recommendations were lying unheeded by the law makers of the country.

In its report of March 2000⁶, the Law Commission focused on the need to review the rape laws in the light of increased incidents of sexual abuse against minors. It suggested that rather than a focus on the physiological aspects of sexual abuse in defining the offence, the lasting psychological damage to the child ought to be considered and stringent provisions created to prevent such crimes.

Both at the macro and individual level change has to come from the outside as well as from within. Awareness will lead to a change in perceptions both by survivors and by

society. But reform of social and legal support systems is crucial if these changes are to become meaningful.

Dealing with Sexual Abuse – Guidelines to teach children

- Remember that your body is yours
- No one (including your parents, relatives, teachers and doctor) should touch you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable
- Just say NO and GO
- Walk away and tell an adult you trust about what happened
- If that person does not listen or does not take action, tell another adult until you get help
- Do not be afraid to ask for help
- Share your emotions with a counsellor or support group (<http://www.rahifoundation.org/>)
- You can also call Childline 1098 for help and counsel

- 1 Ashwini Ailawadi (ed.) *Voices from the Silent Zone: Women's Experiences of Incest and Childhood Sexual Abuse*. RAHI, New Delhi, 1998
- 2 Maharukh Adenwalla. *Child Sexual Abuse*. Indian Centre for Human Rights and Law, Mumbai, 2000
- 3 Pinki Virani. *Bitter Chocolate*. Penguin Books, 2000, p. 64
- 4 Ministry of Women and Child Development. *Study on Child Abuse: India 2007*, <http://wcd.nic.in/childabuse.pdf>
- 5 Pinki Virani. *Bitter Chocolate*. Penguin Books, 2000, p. 199
- 6 Law Commission of India. *172nd Report on Review of Rape Laws*. March, 2000, <http://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/rapelaws.htm>

Conceiving Sexual Agency

**Sexuality, rights,
homophobia,
class and Islam
in contemporary
Bangladesh**

All is not black and white... and we want to explore the shades of grey. Feminism is diverse and we don't always agree totally with one another, though we may share a similar perspective. While we don't want to silence other viewpoints, we want to focus on the finer distinctions between arguments used by people who are on the same side of the table.

**What are the ways in which people
are oppressed?**

**Is homophobia a universal signifier
of oppression?**

**What are the paradoxes inherent in
international advocacy for gay rights?**

Contemporary Bangladesh presents a rather paradoxical situation in terms of non-normative genders and sexualities. For example, historically there have been at least two publicly visible sexual/gender subcultures of putatively effeminate males desiring macho males namely *Hijra* and *Kothi*. Moreover owing to rampant homosociality (the fact of two same gendered persons' being in intimate relation is not generally accorded any homoerotic connotations) a wide range of linguistically unmarked and culturally unrecognized same sex sexualities have also been existent. Alongside these, transnational gay 'underground' groups also emerged from 2000 onwards. Yet same sex sexualities remain criminalized though socio-legal persecution is rare.

Against this backdrop I attempt to highlight the complex intermingling of factors like 'homophobia', class, Islam, emergent rights activism and political economy in the production of contested sexual agency.

Is there any homophobia in Bangladesh?

Hijra a cultic sub-culture of lower class nonnormative 'males' with extensive community rules and rituals is publicly institutionalized. *Hijras* are often seen to stroll through the hectic streets of Dhaka in groups. *Kothi* another subculture of nonnormative 'males' but less conspicuous than the hijras subvert socially imposed masculinity in specific spaces like the cruising gardens and then vanish into the mainstream

ADNAN HOSSAIN

macho society as normative males. There is also a subculture of *kothi* known as the '*gamchali*' (*Gamcha* is a patch of woven cloth used to wipe the face and hands. *Gamchali kothis* are so called as they wear *gamcha* across their chest) *kothis* who work as cooks in the construction sites in urban spaces. Owing to a great deal of inter-community migration and overlapping communitarian traits these groups are hard to distinguish. Nevertheless a few commonalities that bind these groups are their shared resistance to normative masculinity and the desiring of the 'macho' males. To the wider society however all these groups are just *hijras* a word often invoked by all and sundry to refer to any one 'not man enough'.

In Bangladesh 'transgenderism' is not conflated with any form of homoeroticism in the popular imaginary. Thus the *hijra/kothis*¹ are often read as asexual/impotent people without any genitalia. The fact that *hijras* have sex with 'men' does not occur to the majority mainstream. *Hijras* too reinforce this image of their asexuality and claim to have been born like that though a majority of the *hijras* are

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non-emasculated or what the *hijras* call '*Janana*'. So are the *gamchali* and garden *kothis*. Nevertheless I am keen on reading this institutionalised presence as an instance of 'acceptance' engendered by a lack of knowledge in the wider society about *hijra/kothi* non-normative sexuality.

Gay groups emerged in Bangladesh from 2000 onwards among the middle/upper class males. Many of these groups have increasingly started to use public spaces for rendezvous though without much publicity. Moreover, at least half a dozen NGOs are currently working with the MSM (men who have sex with men) across Bangladesh.

To the best of my knowledge there has not been any organised onslaught on the *hijra/kothi* or gay men². Nor has there been any threat from the Islamic pockets or the government. In fact Bangladeshi society is not segregated based on a concept of sexual preference. There is no used word in Bengali for 'straight'. Nor is there any widely used currency for homosexual. There is also a lack of public discourse on homosexuality. Even the fact that

homosexuality stands criminalized is largely unknown³.

This is however not to suggest that same sex sexualities and marginal gender identities are celebrated in Bangladesh. Rather in the context of Bangladesh what is evident is an overarching heterosexuality. Heterosexuality considered the morally superior and natural category of sexuality has never allowed non-normative desire to rise to the status of a legitimate sexuality. Therefore fear of same sex desire or 'homophobia' could not gain adequate conceptual depth.

Recent scholarship has driven home the limitation of the concept of homophobia as a universal signifier to refer to the oppression of same sex sexuality. For instance Bryant and Vidal-Ortiz (2008)⁴ argue that the uncritical deployment of homophobia tends to impose preconceived judgments foreclosing attention to multiple axes of power through which oppression is systematised. This is particularly significant for a socio-cultural context like Bangladesh where not only the concept of western-style homophobia is absent but also there is no overt persecution of people based on sexual orientation. In fact the nature of 'heteronormativity' in Bangladeshi society is such that it not only grants space for unrestrained same gender interaction but also encourages same gender sociality as opposed to heterogendered ones. As a result same gendered persons are often seen to walk with their hands tied to each other without provoking any cultural anxiety. Two men living in the same house for years also do not instigate the wider society to even remotely conflate it with any form of same sex eroticisms. This is however not to argue that 'queerness' is entrenched in Bangladeshi social structure. Rather the extent to which homosociality enables or restrains homoeroticism is still subject to research.

Against this backdrop I argue against the uncritical transposition of 'western-fabricated' homophobia onto the Bangladeshi social context where the socio-cultural configuration is far more complicated with 'homophobia' never taking the overt form of physical violence but manifesting through a multiplicity of vectors of power like class and religion that are often in operation in consolidating regimes of oppression.

'Lower class people are more accepting than the upper class'

Production of sexual subjectivity is complexly mediated through class. The publicly visible *hijra* and *kothi* generally emerge from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Their acceptance is also higher among the lower class. For example *hijras/kothis* live in the poor neighbourhoods in urban Dhaka alongside the normative population. Though

there is generally a lack of knowledge about *hijra/kothi* sexuality, *hijra/kothi* marriage with normative men are routine practices in such neighbourhoods.

In the last six months I attended at least ten such marriage⁵ ceremonies where non-community neighbors were present as guests. Based on my fieldwork, I can argue that there is generally a greater degree of acceptance, not just tolerance among the lower class of non-normative 'men'. On the other hand, in the middle/upper class when such marriages/engagements take place it is always very surreptitious with mostly gay-identified men participating in such events. One reason I can only provisionally offer for this is that middle/upper class men grow up with a sense of 'classed social respectability' that they find difficult to disrupt. Thus class privilege instead of being a

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boon becomes a burden for the majority of middle/upper class same sex attracted men in urban Bangladesh.

Hijra/kothis often fret that middle/upper class society rarely accept them though men from these classes often buy sex from the *hijra/kothi*. In fact in the popular imagination of the middle and upper class (including the gay-identified section) *hijra/kothis* are ‘foul-smelling’, ‘dirty’, ‘violent’, ‘shameless’ people. Thus it is the lower class status with its associated imageries of ‘foul smell’ and ‘filth’ through which *hijra/kothis* are discursively produced as the abjected others.

Thus the paradox is that while the lower socio-economic status grants the non-normative ‘men’ relative freedom/agency to come out and celebrate sexuality /gender nonconformity, it is highly likely that the same groups of men might not be able to do the same when they move up the socio-economic ladder. Class therefore can be both empowering as well as disempowering in terms of how sexual agency is exercised.

Islam and same sex sexuality: A strange bedfellow?

Let me share the story of a *hijra* friend who I will call Sonia for the purposes of this article. Sonia now in heris⁶ late 40s underwent emasculation ten years back. Recently s/he performed the *hajj* pilgrimage. After returning from *hajj* Sonia has been working with the local mosque in Dhaka as a volunteer in weekly Islamic preaching and moves from door to door with other ‘*musolli*’ to preach Islam. Sonia also supervises a *hijra* group in the same area. The mosque committee and the locals are aware of heris being a *hijra*. Sonia’s ‘hijrahood’ has never stood as a roadblock to heris

This is however not to suggest that the dominant Islamic/official establishments approve of same sex sexuality or cross-dressing practices. Rather my precise point is that Islam, at least the practised version of it, does not seem to be incommensurate with non-normative sexualities and gender identities in contemporary Bangladesh.

acceptance into the normative social spaces. Examples attesting to such compatible juxtaposition of Islam with *hijra/kothis* are abundant in contemporary Bangladesh. *Hijra/kothis* openly cross-dress and roam around in public spaces. Many of my *hijra/kothi* interlocutors live in buildings where *madrasas* (Islamic religious schools) are lodged without any conflict. In the Internet message boards used by the gay groups I have never seen a single reporting of any attack by the Islamists. To the best of my knowledge there has not been any documented case of Islamic persecution of *hijra/kothi* or gay people.

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Islam, at least the practised version of it, does not seem to be incommensurate with non-normative sexualities and gender identities in contemporary Bangladesh.

In a recent article Long (2009)⁷ details out the prurient exuberance of western press and advocacy organizations about homosexual persecution in Iran. Long, an LGBT human rights activist, takes several alleged cases of persecution on board and demonstrates how these cases have been tempered with erroneous facts and circulated as judgments in the guise of facts. Interestingly, in the last one year, in one of the message boards of a gay group in Bangladesh several emails have been posted by foreign lawyers asking for evidence of persecution of gays in the hands of Islamists to buttress cases of Bangladeshi homosexuals seeking asylum abroad. Such claims have always been thrown overboard by the gay members as downright falsehoods. Such messages in fact point up the problematic orientalist ascription of prejudged homophobia to Muslim societies like Bangladesh.

The paradox of sexual rights

International advocacy and human rights organizations like ILGA and many others periodically bring out reports with countries like Bangladesh and India marked out as ‘homophobic’ on the ground of penal code section 377. Interestingly in the history of Bangladesh Sec 377 has rarely been used against the same sex attracted individuals⁸. NGOs catering to the sexual health needs of the so called ‘MSM’ would not have been able to operate for more than a decade had this law been in use.

So why bring up Sec 377 all of a sudden? A few NGO-based interlocutors recently brought to my attention that Sec 377 is increasingly figuring as an agenda now that there is this new trend to fund rights as opposed to HIV and AIDS work. So while I acknowledge the undesirability of Sec 377 I argue that abrupt activism around its repeal is highly likely to give rise to an unprecedented ‘homophobia’ and consequent social segregation based on the homo/hetero binary with the added disadvantage of legal persecution under Sec 377. Perhaps more than anything else the nascent rights activists need to take this paradox into account before moves towards the repeal of Sec 377 are made.

Political economy of sexual agency

Western-style queer politics has in recent times become the ultimate yardstick to measure sexual agency of the non-western others though ironically anti-sodomy laws were mostly colonial introductions. I draw attention in

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this section to the role of global political economy in upholding western recognition-based queer politics as the desideratum. This is however not to suggest that ‘queer globalism’ is a one way traffic or culture is bound in space and time but my precise point is the degree to which cultural interpenetration occurs is still uneven with the standpoints of the economically wealthy often becoming hegemonic. Thus a particular/western way of being ‘queer’ becomes agential (LGBT visibility politics and its battle for civil rights) while any deviations from it are deemed as ‘defective’ (*hijra*, *kothi*). And it is this hegemonic ‘homonormativity’ that needs to be challenged. I am not suggesting that gay is foreign and a threat to the *hijra*, *kothi*. Rather, gay in contemporary Bangladesh is very much reconfigured and can co-exist alongside the *hijra*, *kothi* and other non-identity-based male to male sexualities. But to assume that *hijra/kothi* and other non-identity-based male to male homoeroticisms are less political than the gay is problematic.

In Bangladesh however it is not gay but ‘MSM’ that has become an accepted way of articulating male

same sex sexuality in the policy domain. Though originally intended as a way to capture non-identity-based male to male sexuality ‘MSM’ in recent times has become a sort of an identity. Many of the non-normative men including the *hijra/kothi*-identified in contemporary Bangladesh identify and are identified as ‘MSM’. Expressions like ‘I am an MSM’ or ‘Look at those MSMs coming’ have become routine. Concealed in this seemingly innocuous moniker is a deeper politics of representational effacement/violence

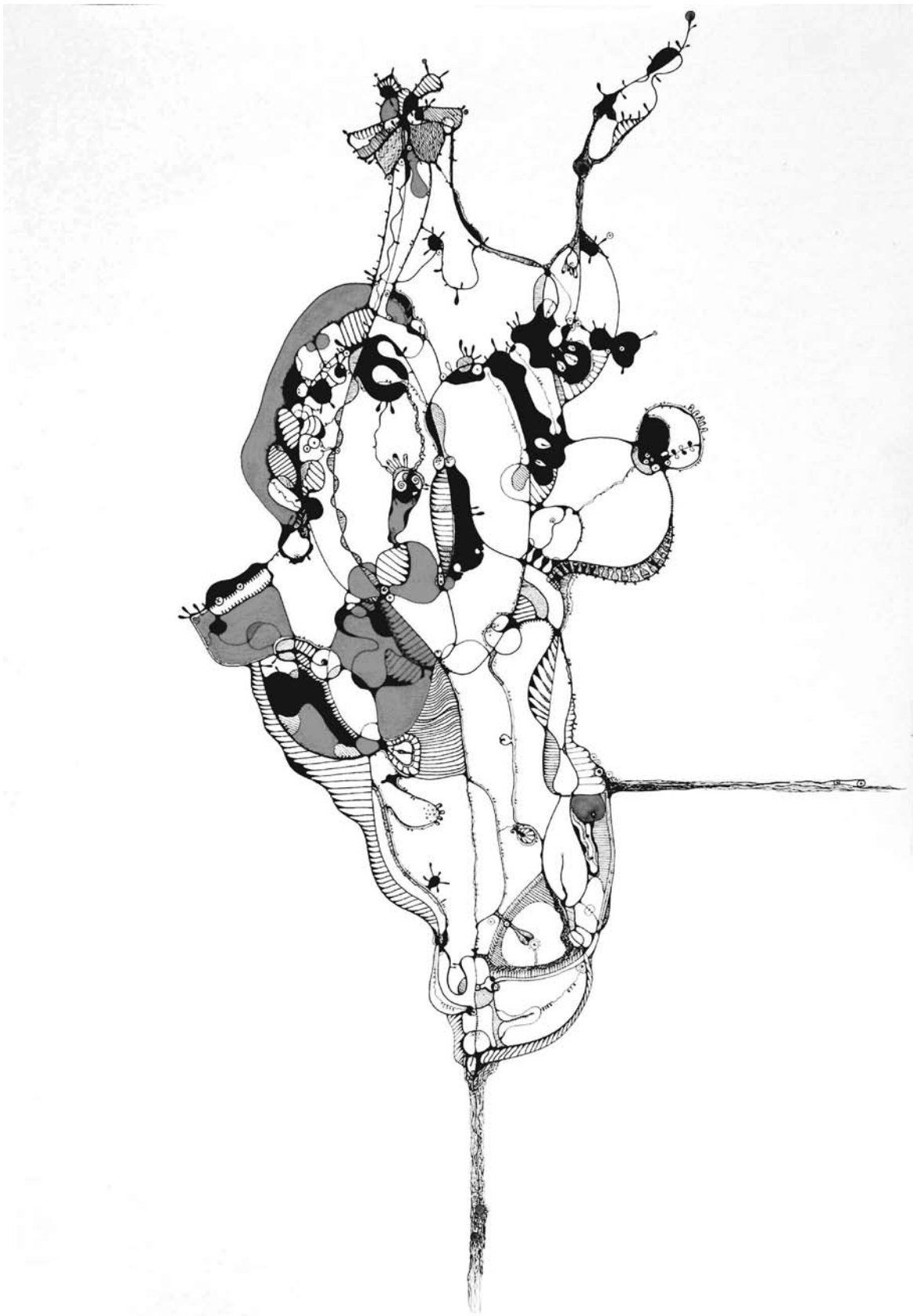
enacted through both scholarship and activism⁹. It is as if Bangladeshi male to male sexualities have never been able to rise to the status of identity. A few academic friends in a recent workshop argued that if people embrace 'MSM' as an identity why that would be a problem. This in fact raises important questions about agency/structure. Thus we need to keep in mind the reasons for why people do what they do and under what conditions and to what extent what they do is regulated by the political economy of development intervention over which they have no direct control.

Conclusion

In much of contemporary sexuality studies and activism there is a tendency to consider 'desire' as unregulated and autonomous. It is as if desire springs up in a vacuum and erotic justice can be therefore sought outside the broader combat for socio-political justice. I do not however indicate that individual sexual subjects are solely determined by international division of labor with individuals as passive victims as Marxian monists might contend. Rather my precise point is sexual agency is multiply inflected and is not reducible to one single variable like law, religion or class but is to be understood as a corollary of complex translocal processes where a plethora of factors like culture and political economy intersect to simultaneously bring into being and erase sexual agency.

Adnan Hossain currently a PhD student in Social Anthropology in the University of Hull, UK has been working on gender and sexual diversity in Bangladesh for about a decade now. Recently he has contributed an entry on Bangladesh for The Greenwood Encyclopedia of LGBT Issues Worldwide (forthcoming). He also worked on the production of the civil society report on LGBTI rights in Bangladesh for the 4th round of the UPR for the UN Human Rights Council. He can be reached at hossainadnan@rocketmail.com

- 1 Despite the differences between the hijra and kothi I use 'hijra/kothi' interchangeably throughout this paper as kothi based on my fieldwork emerges as a hijra clandestine argot used to refer to effeminate males. Thus, as many of my hijra/kothi-identified informants suggest, all hijras are kothis but all kothis are not hijras. But at the same time kothis can become hijras as much as hijras can become kothis depending on the social space in which one operates.
- 2 This is not to suggest that there is no violence. But based on my fieldwork in the last 8 months and previous 10 years of informal involvement with these communities I can say violence is not rampant.
- 3 In several meetings with the law enforcers in the last 6 months through the NGOs this became evident that the police are not aware of 377. Rather it is always under section 54 of CRPC that police detain and harass the kothis/hijra sex workers. Section 54 allows the police to arrest anyone on the ground of suspicion.
- 4 Bryant and Vidal-Ortiz. 2008. Introduction to Re-theorizing Homophobias. *Sexualities* Vol. 11(4):387-396 Sage Publication, Los Angeles.
- 5 While non-normative marriage is illegal in Bangladesh, hijra, kothi and gay men refer to such pair-bonding as marriage.
- 6 Though pronoun in Bengali is uninflected by gender I use 'heris' (I juxtapose 'er' from 'Her' with 'is' from 'His' with the prefix 'H') not only to destabilize the notion of gender as a natural category but also to highlight Sonia's gender transitive behaviors.
- 7 Scott Long. 2009. Unbearable Witness: How Western Activists (Mis)Recognize Sexuality in Iran. *Contemporary Politics* Vol. 15, (1):119-136. Routledge, London
- 8 To the best of my knowledge there was only one case in history fought in the court under this section.
- 9 In many academic research and NGO reports on Bangladesh male to male sexuality is often framed through the lens of 'MSM'. A recent NGO publication is titled 'Let us Ensure the Rights of the MSM' and throughout there is no explanation of what MSM even stands for.



Sex | ink and acrylic on oil paper

PRATIBHA SINGH

works on paper and canvas

I have a feeling, if I share with you a story, you would understand, because basically we humans feel from the heart. There is a balance in our universe and it applies to our life because we are connected to this universal rhythm. That is a quality we all inherently have.

I'm not an artist because of my training. I'm an artist because one day I listened to my heart and this is a story that I wish to share with you.

One afternoon in July 2005, I was reading a book and came across a story where a person describes meeting a Messiah. "His eyes had endless depth", he says. This Messiah was Yeshwa, and this person was in a past life regression session. Upon reading this line, something shifted inside me. I closed my eyes and commanded the Source to download this person in my life who has endless depth in his eyes. I believed I conceived and named my son Yeshwa.

We humans have a great gift – we can wish. In what form our wishes will manifest, is not for us to decide.

During the same time I began sketching. These sketches were like a conversation between Yeshwa and me.

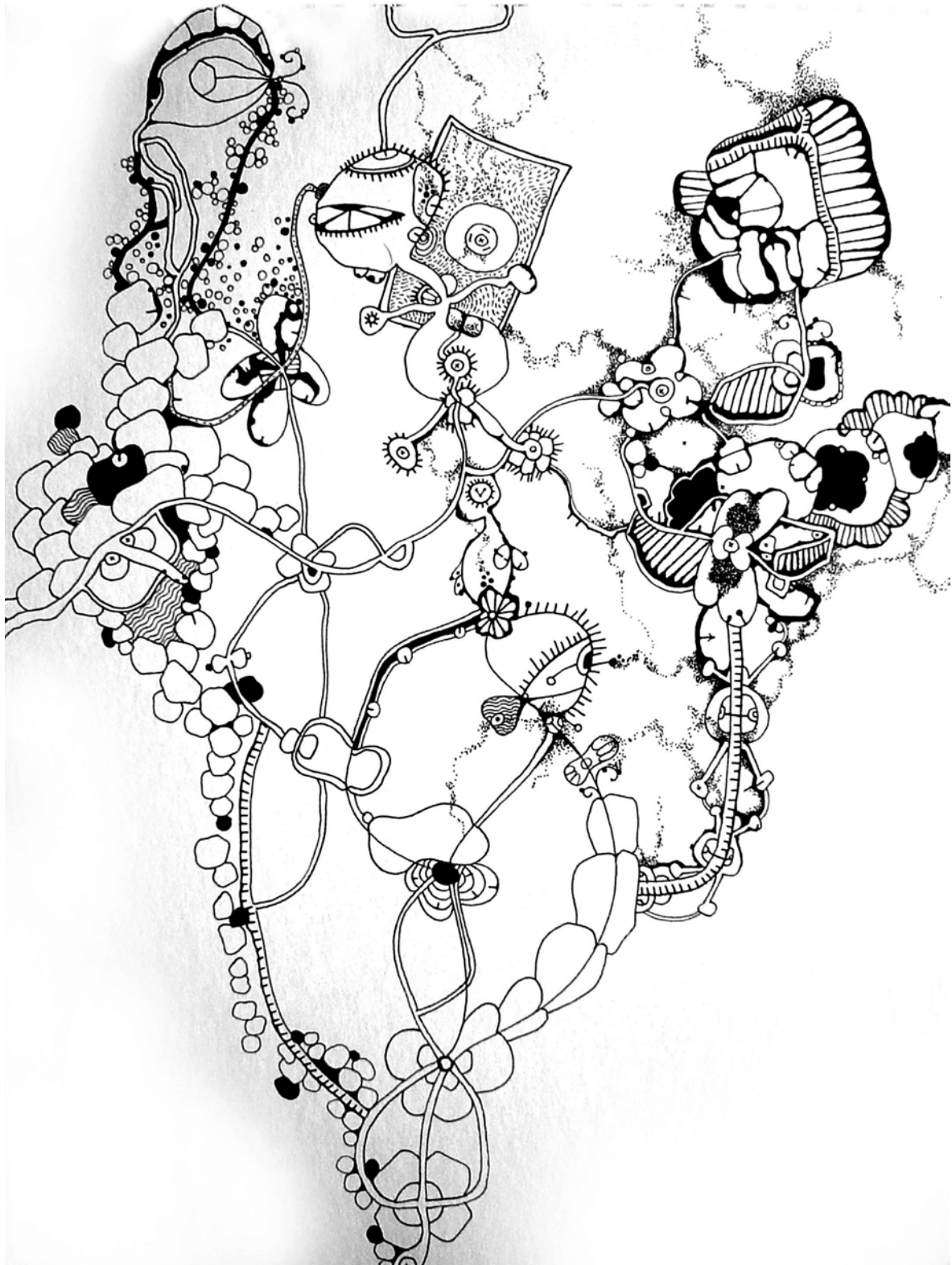
Four months passed and there was no sign of an actual pregnancy and I was almost on the verge of being declared insane by my family and friends to whom I would talk about Yeshwa like he was an actual person, and that is what he was for me. I would tell them that I know he is there but right now he's hiding from me.

It was November and finally my doctor declared me a little over four weeks pregnant.

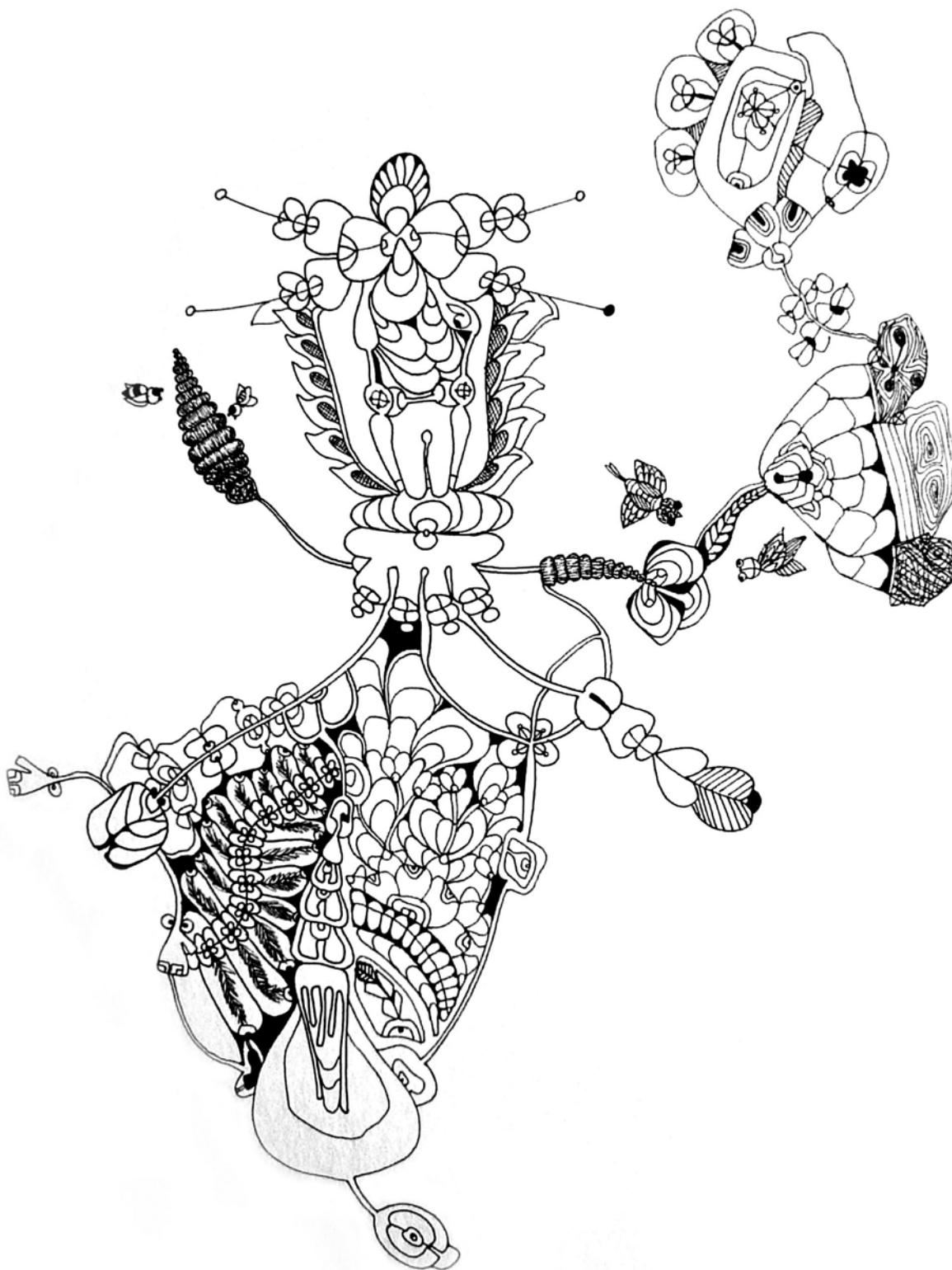
I don't know why I started painting. Was it loneliness or love, hope or desperation or the only option I had? Was it a need to run and hide or a need to be found? Was it a need to know that there is magic, that stories are real, that love is?

I don't know, but I paint.

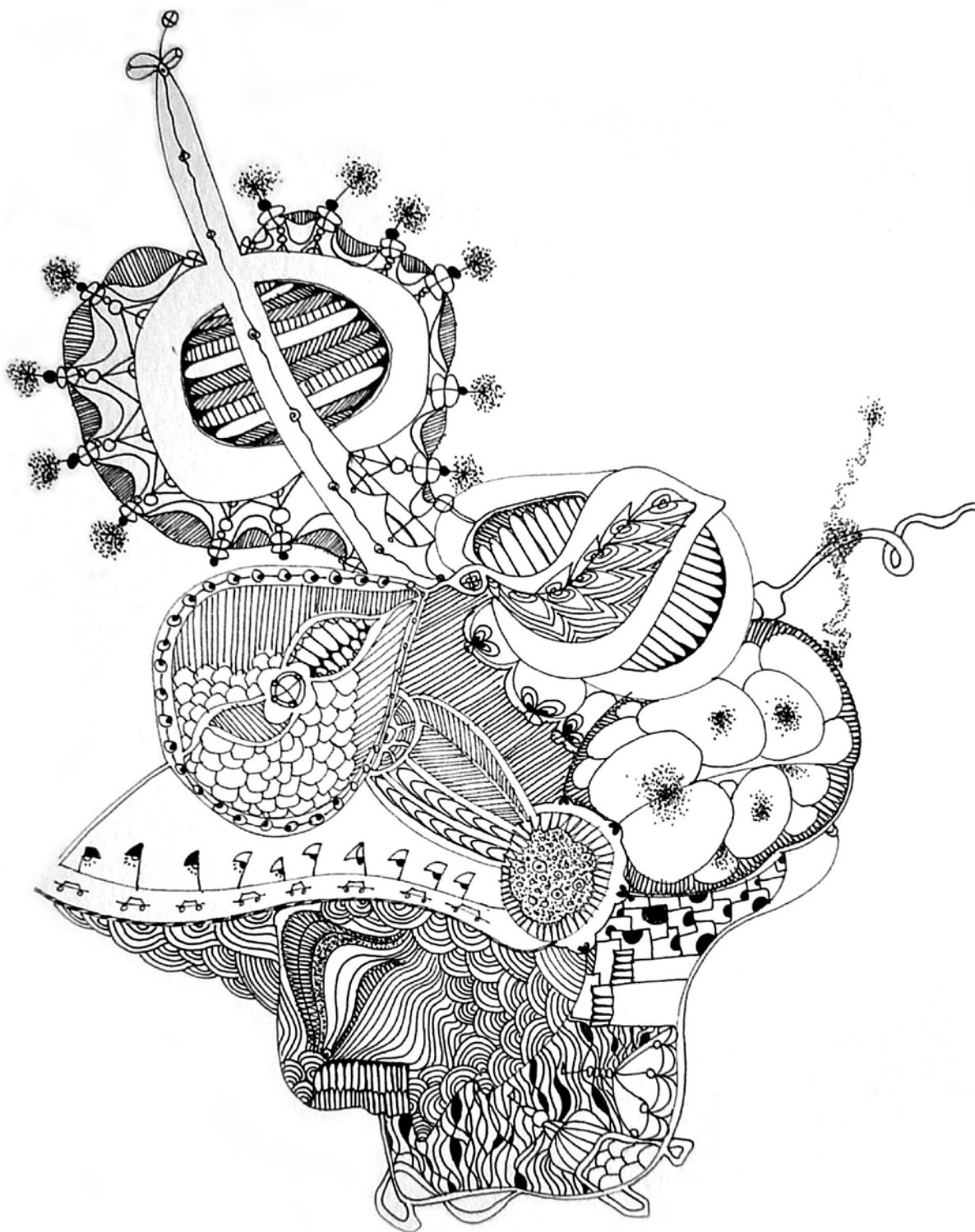
Originally a fashion design graduate from the National Institute of Fashion Technology **Pratibha Singh** works out of her studio apartment in the beautiful greens of Mehrauli and from time to time through artist residencies. To view some of her other works visit <http://indianartnews.ning.com/profile/pratibha>. She can be contacted at singapratibha@gmail.com



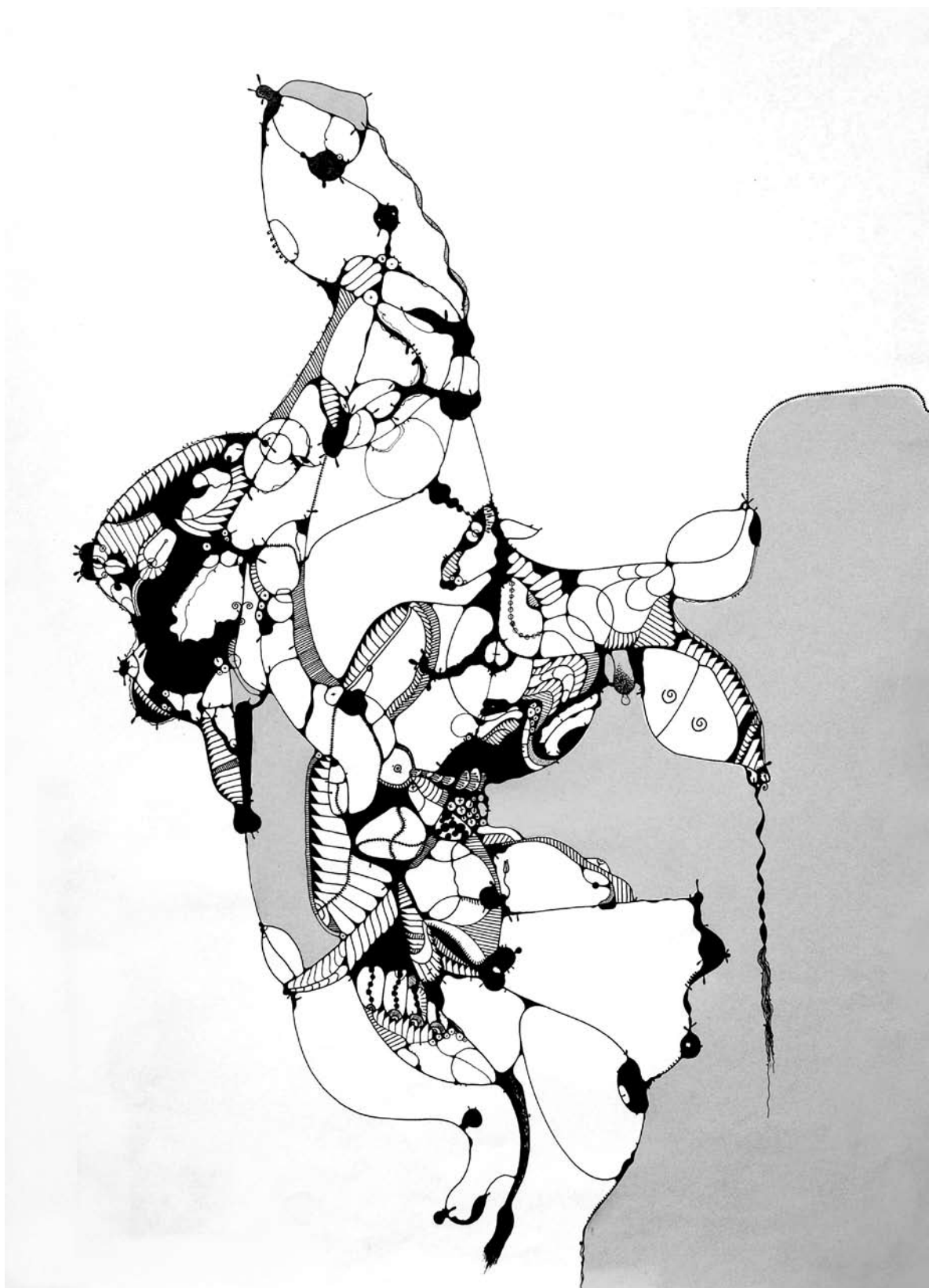
Genepool | thread on canvas



Bees, Birds and Pregnant Women | thread on canvas



Dream | thread on canvas



Mother | ink and acrylic on oil paper

groping in the dark

... SELF INSIGHT ON MATTERS OF SEXUAL AROUSAL AND SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR ARE IMPORTANT IN SEXUAL DECISION-MAKING. THIS CAN BE FACILITATED BY ENSURING THAT YOUNG PERSONS HAVE ACCESS TO SEXUALITY EDUCATION THAT IS COMPREHENSIVE, AFFIRMING AND ACCURATE; SEXUALITY EDUCATION THAT LEAVES THEM INFORMED AND AWARE ABOUT SEX AND THEIR SEXUAL FEELINGS AND EQUIPS THEM WITH THE POWER TO ACT POSITIVELY AND SENSIBLY IN SEXUAL SITUATIONS.

A few weeks ago as I sat reading a Training Manual on Gender and Sexuality, my 17 year-old niece looked over my shoulder and wanted to know how much training is required for sex. My response, that it was sexuality training I was reading about, met with a look that said ‘What’s the difference?!’ I wasn’t surprised by her reaction considering the opinions that are being expressed in the on-going debate around the Adolescent Education Program.

We got into a discussion on sex education or as I would prefer it to be – sexuality education. We spoke about sexual desire and choices; being sexually active and practising safer sex; the confusion that comes with being 16-17 years old and the desire to ‘fit in’; when and how to say ‘no’ and many other such things. As we talked there was a part of me that wondered at the situation.

On the one hand is my niece who would fit the profile of a bright teenager. She reads a lot and has many opportunities to witness and participate in discussions that can help her learn to analyse; she studies in a school that encourages her to think and show initiative; the significant adults around her are aware and sensitive enough to ensure that she can talk to them about almost everything under the sun. Like other young people in my extended family, my niece has read TARSHI’s *Red Book* and *Blue Book* from cover to cover, asked questions and giggled over it with her friends! Despite all this, she still was not sure about so many things. There was so much that puzzled her.

VERONICA GEORGE

Then there is myself. I am no authority on matters of sex or sexuality. I do have the good fortune to have access to a body of literature as well as friends who work on issues of sexuality and sexual and reproductive health rights. As a result, I think I am fairly informed and sensible about the subject.

We got lucky – my niece and I – that we have a relationship that allows her to talk and ask questions about a subject that the average adult would rather avoid; that we have the time and the space to share thoughts and ideas. What about the thousands of other young teenagers, who find it difficult to talk to their parents or other adult caregivers and do not have access to information (unbiased or not) about matters of sex and sexuality. A majority acquire some information about the mechanics of sex by way of stories, rumours and innuendo or by way of a talk on duty and responsibility in which sexual behaviour maybe mentioned. In general though, I believe that on matters of sex, young people in their late teens rely more on the information their peers provide than what the ‘adults’ tell them!

Teenage is one of the more volatile stages of a person’s life. Not only is your body going through all kinds of changes but your mind and emotions are also confused. One day you like something or someone and the next day you could hate them with a passion you didn’t know you had in you. And your only true companions in this journey are your peers who are also on the same roller coaster ride. Parents

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and other adults are incidental. Their job is to feed you, to stuff you with information and hold your hand – to see to it that this rocky world you suddenly inhabit doesn't fall off the face of the earth. As teenagers see it – parents really can't do anything else because they don't understand what's going on with teenagers!

Thinking of this volatile mix I was reminded of a book *Predictably Irrational*¹ by Daniel Ariely, a Behavioural Economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In this book, Ariely shares with us the results of many studies that try to understand “the hidden forces that shape our decisions”. Through a series of experiments, Ariely concludes that no matter how ‘good’ a person is, they can never predict the effect of strong emotion on their behaviour. I'm sure all of us will concur – we are witness to enough riots and violence that seem to break out at the drop of a hat. In our personal lives too, many of us can testify to acting ‘out of character’ when in the grip of a strong emotion.

One of the studies conducted by Ariely focused on the influence of sexual arousal on decision making among sexually active young men. The study, conducted among young male students in the University of California Berkeley² was designed to test if a state of sexual arousal influenced three aspects of judgment and choice – preferences for a wide range of sexual stimuli; willingness to engage in morally questionable behaviour; and their willingness to engage in unprotected sex, and whether the young men could accurately predict these influences. The study shows that even the most level-headed young person, in the heat of the moment can switch from “Just say no” to “Yes” in a heartbeat. It also underlines that people are not able to predict how they will behave when in the grip of a strong emotion.

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Teenagers are susceptible to strong emotion. In their search to know themselves, in the questioning of and/or breaking the ‘rules’, they could engage in behaviours that are risky and dangerous for themselves and for others. The most attractive of these of course, are those that are considered so bad that people hardly talk about them – experimentation with drugs, alcohol and sex.

Sex education as we know it now is somewhat like a biology lesson focused on the reproductive system. Most young people walk away from those lessons with a working knowledge of the reproductive system and safer sex behaviours, but remain confused about what to do and how to manage when faced with a situation that requires sexual decision-making. The ABC (Abstinence, Be faithful, use a Condom) model of education assumes that young persons have the ability not to give in to peer pressure; have the ability to switch off passion when required and if the first two fail, have a condom easily available just in case!

When two young people get together the last thing they think about is a condom and safer sex. On top of their mind is usually a confusion of thoughts – Does he/she love me? Should I let him kiss me? Will my parents know? How do I let her/him know that I don't like this? What am I supposed to do? Can anyone see us? Will he/she make fun of me? What if I don't enjoy this? Will we be friends after this?

It becomes imperative therefore that the information that is provided to young people goes beyond the mechanics to address the emotions that go with sex. The focus should be on strategies to deal with the emotions that accompany sexual arousal. Young people should realise they have two options – to walk away before a situation becomes too difficult to resist or learn to deal

with the consequences of saying yes in the heat of the moment.

To learn to walk away before it gets too difficult, the teenager has got to know himself or herself – what are the triggers that can set them off? As Ariely says “... to make informed decisions we need somehow to experience and understand the emotional state we’ll be in at the other side of the experience. Learning how to bridge this gap is essential in making some of the important decisions of our lives.”(pp 104) Put simply, self insight on matters of sexual arousal and sexual behaviour are important in sexual decision-making. This can be facilitated by ensuring that young persons have access to sexuality education that is comprehensive, affirming and accurate; sexuality education that leaves them informed and aware about sex and their sexual feelings and equips them with the power to act positively and sensibly in sexual situations. We need to remember that we are addressing young people not animals. They are on a steep learning curve, enthusiastic and anxious to get information that will help them make smarter decisions.

A couple of weeks after our talk, my niece came back from school feeling very superior – seemingly many of her class mates friends did not know half the things she knew about sex and sexuality! “How come”, she asked, “something like this is not included in our curriculum? Why isn’t all this explained to us? Why do have to grope in the dark?” What could I tell her?

THE ABC (ABSTINENCE, BE FAITHFUL, USE A CONDOM) MODEL OF EDUCATION ASSUMES THAT YOUNG PERSONS HAVE THE ABILITY NOT TO GIVE IN TO PEER PRESSURE; HAVE THE ABILITY TO SWITCH OFF PASSION WHEN REQUIRED AND IF THE FIRST TWO FAIL, HAVE A CONDOM EASILY AVAILABLE JUST IN CASE!

- 1 Ariely, Daniel. 2008. Predictably Irrational –The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions. NY: Harper
- 2 Ariely, D & G. Loewenstein. 2006. The Heat of the Moment –The Effect of Sexual Arousal on Sexual Decision Making. The Journal of Behavioral Decision Making 19, 87-98 http://web.mit.edu/ariely/www/MIT/Papers/Heat_of_Moment.pdf

After more than 16 years in the social development sector – working with a number of non-government community-based and development support organizations such as the Urmul Trust in Bikaner, Dastkar in Delhi, PRIA, Delhi and Oxfam GB in Afghanistan, **Veronica George** set up practice as a Foot Reflexologist. She is based in Gurgaon, where in partnership with a friend, she has set up a space that offers different wellness therapies, to help individuals live healthy, happy and harmonious lives.

lars and the real girl

I was lazily surfing television channels one evening, pausing here, flickering there. At some point, I broke into a movie that had already begun. I thought I'd watch it for a while, then move on. An hour later, I was still glued to the screen, riveted by a unique relationship between an adult man and an adult doll – or *Lars and the 'Real Girl'*.

In this independent American film directed by Craig Gillespie, Lars Lindstrom is a young man who appears dysfunctional in his relationships, or lack of them – he finds it difficult to interact with or relate to his family, his colleagues, or his fellow parishioners in the church in his small town. His pregnant sister-in-law's persistent attempts to lure him into a family meal are usually rebuffed, and on the rare occasions he accepts, their conversation is stilted. And he experiences severe pain when touched, even lightly.

Enter Bianca. When this shy young man announces that Bianca is coming to visit him, his family – brother Gus and sister-in-law Karin – is thrilled. He's never ever had someone visit him, let alone a woman. The excitement lasts until they meet Bianca – a life-size anatomically-correct doll who Ryan ordered off the Internet and has given a 'real' identity as a wheelchair-bound missionary of Brazilian and Danish descent. Now they don't know what to do. Should they pretend she's real and play along with Lars' delusion? Or should they just get Lars to face reality?



BISHAKHA DATTA



As Gus and Karin try to deal with their dilemma, a psychologist advises them to treat Bianca as a real woman. It's not schizophrenia or a hallucination, she tells them. It's a delusion. Meanwhile, freed up from the pressure to interact by a non-interactive relationship with a doll, Lars begins to introduce Bianca as his girlfriend to his co-workers and various townspeople. Aware of the situation, everyone reacts to the doll as if she were real, and Bianca soon finds herself involved in volunteer programs, getting a makeover from the local beautician, and working part-time as a model in a clothing store. Due to their acceptance of Bianca, Lars soon finds himself interacting more with people. And the film goes on, but I'm not telling you where it ends.

In 2007, *Lars and the Real Girl* won one Oscar nomination and numerous other awards in the United States where it was commercially released. Ryan Gosling expectedly – and deservedly – won several of these for his tour de performance as Lars. Gosling is to Lars what Sean Penn is to Harvey Milk in *Milk*: he defines the role. He takes over the character and makes it his own. He *is* Lars. Nancy Oliver picked up a bunch of awards for Best Original Screenplay, while Craig Gillespie was voted Most Promising Filmmaker by the Chicago Film Critics Association. This was his first feature film.

It's one thing to win a bunch of awards. It's quite another



to be a stand-out film. *Lars and the Real Girl* stands out for many reasons. To begin with, the concept of the blow-up doll. “I had a weird job where I had to deal with a lot of websites and a lot of lonely guys,” screenwriter Nancy Oliver told the independent film site, indieLondon in an interview. “The dolls advertised were so bizarre they stuck in my head, because you can totally see the reason for them. How many people do you know who can’t operate with real human beings?” Related to this is the concept of how one treats mental illness. “It was a ‘what if?’ thing,” said Oliver in the same interview. “What if we didn’t treat our mentally ill people like animals? What if we brought kindness and compassion to the table?”

If a treatment ethic of kindness and compassion are the film’s conceptual bulwarks, the treatment of Bianca is itself one of the highlights. Even though she’s a doll, Bianca is treated as ‘real’ – in a screen sense. She’s imagined from the point of view of Lars, who perceives her as real – not from the point of view of the community, which knows she’s unreal. Visually, she’s stunning; she doesn’t look alive as such, but she conforms to the visual standards of the ‘real’ world. So when you see Bianca sitting at the dining table, she looks like one of the diners – even though she

can’t eat a thing. When she’s wheeled into a party, she looks like one of the guests – even though she can’t speak to the rest of them. When she comes out of the salon after a perm, you notice her haircut.

The beauty of this treatment also lies in shifting the audience’s gaze – from initially treating her as a plastic doll to increasingly seeing her as real. *Lars and the Real Girl* allows us to be gently amused for a while, as the town’s initial reaction to Bianca mirrors our own. A doll? But it does not milk this reaction. Instead of developing into a flat-out, slapstick comedy, it becomes a whimsical allegory that touches on serious issues related to emotional isolation and the unacknowledged inability to handle personal loss. (Lars withdrew into his shell after the death of his parents). As one viewer posted on the online Internet Movie Database: “If anyone had told me I would one day be crying during a movie about a man and his blow-up doll, I would have called them a liar. But, here I am, going through at least three Kleenex even after the movie is over.”

Not that *Lars and...* is a weepfest either. Far from it. Directorially, it’s all about deft understatement and delicate direction – why use a sledgehammer when you can use a



feather? The quiet still interiors of Lars' life are mirrored in the stillness of the camerawork and the house's quiet interiors. Like Lars himself, the movie doesn't allow itself to be categorized. It's not a comedy, nor is it emotional enough to be called 'drama'. It's light and sweet and kind without being cloying and sentimental. Folded into its layers is some sort of message about openness and acceptance — but it doesn't preach. Neither does it strike a false note.

If there's one obvious thing that the script avoids, it's the sexual thing. Yes, there are scenes with *Lars and the Real Girl* lying in bed with one another, but no. Somehow, we never see them having sex. Neither is sex alluded to in this relationship, although you can tell that his family initially thinks that's what he bought the doll for. It's hard to imagine that Lars never thought about Bianca in a sexual context, but for whatever reason, the film gives this a miss. Was it because sex with a doll would be seen as too sordid — and pull audience identification away from Lars? Who knows? As Manohla Dargis wrote in the *New York Times*, "The doll has something hiding under her skirt, but we never see Lars playing peekaboo because this is a story about innocence, not sad sacks having their weird way with artificial vaginas."

Be that as it may. Despite this one shortcoming, *Lars and...* remains a masterpiece of independent cinema. A turn-of-the-century American epoch, lovingly chronicling 21st century neuroses the way French cinema chronicled the excesses of the *belle époque*. In a hundred years of cinema, there's never been anything quite like *Lars and the Real Girl*. Don't miss it.

Bishakha Datta is a non-fiction writer and filmmaker who is currently writing *Selling Sex*, a book on the lives, realities and struggles of sex workers in Kolkata, India. Her two most recent documentary films are *In The Flesh* and *Taza Khabar*. Bishakha is also the executive director of Point of View, a Mumbai-based not-for-profit organization that promotes the points of view of women through media, art and culture.

What These Hands Can Do

A Lesbian Literary & Art Folio

LUNDUYAN NG SINING, INC. 2008

GERMAINE TRITTLE P. LEONIN

There are two things that characterize Philippine Lesbian Literature, a seeming dearth in available material and a conspicuous demand for it by the Filipino Lesbian Community. Ever since *Forbidden Fruit*, an anthology of women's erotic writings, came out in the early 1990s, and a single lesbian piece appeared in its pages albeit under a pseudonym of an unknown writer, there has been a clamour for genuine lesbian literary material. Even the few lesbian collections that followed were produced independently by lesbian groups and published in an almost 'underground' manner are never as easily available as the Philippine Gay Literature popularized by the 'Ladlad' series of editors Danton Remoto and Neil Garcia.

Such was the fate of *Woman-to-Woman*, a compilation of poems and essays by Aida Santos and Giney Villar which faded into oblivion as soon as it was released, and the few remaining pieces are now rumored to be solely in personal collections. Likewise with *Tibok*, which purportedly sought to explore the heartbeat of the Filipino Lesbian and the first to be released commercially by a popular publishing house. And in spite of the occasional lesbian piece which got featured in the webmagazine, Natives' Wish, and in the elusive SteamZine, nowhere else was Filipino lesbian writing as easily accessible in the last decade or so. The special LGBT issue of *Literatura*, a website on Philippine Literature in English was the only other venue which showcased lesbian talent in the last few years.

Thus, *What These Hands Can Do* is a response to this felt

need in the young lesbian community. Since there never was a scarcity of writers and artists from among our lesbian ranks, a new generation of lesbian activists decided to take full advantage of the freedom the written word and the arts allowed them to express their sexuality. The result was a new voice in lesbian advocacy, one that is light and engaging, but just as real as the lives it aims to portray.

Originally intended as a simple collection of 'Coming-Out' stories, the submissions from lesbians of all ages and backgrounds revealed a diversity of experiences that cannot be denied or reduced to a few thematic issues. Thus, the Coming-Out topics ranged from coming out to one's parents or families, to coming-out to one's self in the form of self-acceptance and personal realizations. It can be as private as a letter to your mother, or as public as a news article in a national broadsheet.

The Filipino phrase *Lunduyan ng Sining* roughly translates in English as 'cradle of art'. The group of young lesbians composing *Lunduyan ng Sining* or LNS, is a generation of proud women who wanted to use their education, special training and skills to showcase their unique talents without denying their sexuality or gender identification. Indeed, they have managed to create a kind of lesbian rights advocacy that is not attended by the usual serious, grim and determined, in-your-face activism of long ago. Through this publication, they have successfully revealed the intricacies of lesbian lives in all its 'normalcy'. Lesbian issues and concerns are mainstreamed through literary pieces in such

a way that it is readily accessible to anyone who is interested to learn about the humanity of Filipino lesbians.

In the folio's pages, Filipino lesbians enjoy the physical and virtual space that Philippine society has denied them. The short stories, essays and poems still contain the frustration, the fear and various other difficulties lesbians encounter everyday. They speak of our parents' disappointments and our families' embarrassments, even the anger constantly aimed at us. But behind these experiences are also stories of triumph, independence and freedom borne out of finally being true to one's self. They include longtime, hidden loves eventually acknowledged and new friendships gained. Some families overcame the prejudice and managed to embrace their lesbian daughters. Some mothers expressed an initial hesitance, while some parents' words unfortunately reverberate with bias and ignorance.

All these are told by Filipino lesbians themselves against the backdrop of Philippine traditional values and biases. As such, while the experiences of discrimination and oppression are nothing new, it depicts which social institutions exert the most pressure on Philippine LGBTs. A great deal of homophobia stems from family environments, and hence, this was clearly shown by the Coming-Out stories which tackled mostly parents and family members. Traditional Catholic beliefs so embedded in Filipino culture likewise permeate through the value system of many lesbians. And as a consequence, a palpable conservatism also characterize their views on sex and their sexuality.

This collection of lesbian writings evokes a variety of lesbian voices. With contributors ranging from veteran LGBT advocates to college students, writers, journalists, painters and artists, the common thread is a depiction of their lesbian identity through their art. It does not matter if some of them are simply budding artists or accomplished



writers already. Ultimately one voice rings through this collection and sends out a clear message – we are here and we plan to be around for a long time.

Unknowingly, and perhaps, unwittingly, the organizers of this small project did not realize the implication of their output. The feedback to their call for submissions was overwhelming. Which only goes to show the courage with which Philippine lesbians are now ready to speak out. The degree of tolerance which now greets the apparent visibility of young lesbians in Filipino society is probably a result of the bravery of lesbian advocates

that went before them. But with their continued vigilance in protecting lesbian rights, there is a clear realization that they also recognize their responsibility in joining the struggle for equality and respect.

In simply wanting to showcase their talents, these writers and artists told personal stories rich with sexuality and lesbian identity. Through art, they have mainstreamed lesbian issues and concerns which cannot be forgotten or set aside for a few positive developments like a seeming tolerance and acceptance of LGBTs in modern Philippine society. *What These Hands Can Do* is a merging of art with advocacy.

Germaine Trittle P. Leonin is a legal professional and LGBT rights advocate based in Manila. She is the Founding President of Rainbow Rights Project (R-Rights), Inc., a legal and policy 'think tank' and legal resource center on sexual orientation. She is also the Treasurer of Ang Ladlad LGBT Party and the Corporate Secretary of Lesbian Advocates Philippines (LEAP), Inc. She is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines-Diliman and regularly blogs at <http://germainetrittle86.multiply.com>

... on how sexual rights affect one personally, and how they are affirmed and/or violated in one's local cultural setting.

hell house a survivor's account of same sex abuse

PRANAADHIKA SINHA

I am a survivor of multiple child sexual abuse. Speaking about my survival has been an uphill climb for me. Sometimes I feel like I haven't survived at all, the flashbacks take over and the past haunts like everything occurred just yesterday and not over a decade ago. However, with the help of friends and fellow survivors, my past and I have reached a relatively solid consensus over the frequency of panic attacks and sleeping disorders and have been leading a peaceful co-existence for a couple of years now.

While speaking with a journalist about the prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse in India, it occurred to me that women, while being seen as victims, were rarely perceived as being capable of meting out the same form of physical/emotional/sexual abuse which they are portrayed as being recipients of. Slowly, my experience of being abused by a female friend when I was younger returned, and forced me to delve deeper into this uncharted territory of the female as a perpetrator of violence.

My parents separated when I was five years old, forcing a change of residence to my grandmother's rambling old house. With time the house needed repairs and my mother and I moved in with friends at their house for three months till we were ready to move back. The friends had a daughter, Soniya, who was a little older than I, and rather prone to what we 13 year olds called 'weird behaviour'. She would touch the girls in class and look at them suggestively, and

for her to be called 'lesbian' was not uncommon. However, I didn't succumb to the label drama and considered her to be a close friend. So it didn't bother me that she and I were made to share a bedroom and a bathroom for those three months, not to mention going to school and sitting next to each other (she insisted). The abuse therefore, was a shock, and its roots continue to raise questions about my part in it, if at all.

It began at night, after a sumptuous home-cooked meal and a little television. I suffered from mild sleeping trouble, and it took me a while to get to sleep. Mummy always insisted that I get into bed at a respectable hour and lie down with my eyes closed till sleep overcame me. To Soniya however, I was the fastest sleeper around, she didn't know I was awake. It started with her leg over mine, one arm across my chest. I chose to ignore that. It made heavy progress though, and every night became more and more awkward as I attempted to fathom exactly what was going on while her hands roamed all over my body.

The 'AHA' moment arrived when one night when I was reading a Sidney Sheldon novel (Tell Me Your Dreams) and reached the exact part where the central character realises that her father molested her. That night, Soniya attempted to divest me of my underwear and the puzzle pieces fit instantaneously. I feigned getting up to go to the bathroom and stayed there for the rest of the night, shaking with anger at the realisation of what was being done to me.

Being sexually-abused was not news to me, having been subjected to the trauma at the age of eight years by a caretaker in my father's house. Being abused by a friend, another girl, was not only unbelievable but also an inescapable part of my stay in that house.

There was nobody I could speak with, least of all with my mother or hers, for obvious reason – nobody would believe me, and what proof did I have? Soniya did not physically hurt me, there were no bruises/cuts or any other marks to speak of. How could I prove that her hands were all over me, not to mention other parts of her? If I did disclose the abuse to the grown-ups, they would ask me why I hadn't told them before. What would I say? That I was afraid that I had encouraged it by pretending to be asleep? If hell ever existed on Earth, I lived in the hub of it for those three months of my life.

Finally, the torture ended. We moved out of Hell House and into our own little space in my grandmother's house. I felt relief, if only temporarily, but when a fish has been out of water for so long, even a droplet of water on its body will incite hope, and a desire to struggle. I was no different from the fish.

School became another struggle. Soniya had become accustomed to being with me 24/7, and demanded my attention at all times. From physical touching to meaningful glances, I felt like a pawn in a most dirty game.

I became labelled, like her. 'Lesbian couple', we were called, because of our so-called 'closeness'. From being apathetic about labels, I became paranoid about them. Any hint of closeness to another girl, be it a friendly handshake or sharing a lunch box, and I would run away from the situation.

Hair. I felt that my hair and overall appearance had something to do with the abusive relationship I shared with Soniya. Ugly. I must become ugly to survive. Thus began a reaction to abuse which I need help with, till date.

Uglification became my defence. From a healthy weight to overweight, long hair to short, and friendly disposition

to withdrawn, 'Uglification' of body and soul drove away friends who would otherwise have been around for me.

Suicide was another option. I cut myself regularly in the hope that one day I would hit an artery that would put an end to the pain and confusion I was feeling.

Ten years later.

Today I feel a lot better about myself and am thankful that the suicide option did not work out. Soniya and I are in touch. I confronted her about what she had put me through and she apologised to me for it. In terms of forgiveness I wouldn't say I have forgiven her 100%, there's still a little anger left that I need to work with. Soniya, by the way, is bisexual and I respect her for it.

On an episode of *Salaam Zindagi* on NDTV, I spoke about my abuse (same sex) for the first time and anticipated a lot of hate mail but instead, received messages of solidarity and empathy from both male and female survivors.

While I acknowledge that what I went through with a female who was also a minor cannot be technically-termed as being 'child sexual abuse' as it is more about exploratory sex and touching, the experience left me feeling victimised and left behind scars which are visible, although much lighter than before.

Same sex abuse follows the same definition as child sexual abuse – an unequal power of an adult or older person over a minor (child). In the context of my personal experience, my abuser was close to two years my senior and used her power over me.

Pranaadhika Sinha founded Elaan, an NGO dealing with Child Sexual Abuse and Incest awareness/support in 2007 after running it as a survivor support group for four years. She teaches Human Rights to school students and is currently writing a book on her experiences with sexual abuse awareness activism. Go to <http://elaan.wordpress.com>

can do bar

At a time when there is moral repression on issues of sexuality, whether through censorship in China, non-acknowledgement of women's reproductive rights in the Philippines in the name of the right to life, anti-pornography in Indonesia or attacks on women going to pubs in India, Thailand offers some really interesting lessons on sexuality! Here are snippets of two must-visit places in Thailand.

The **Can Do Bar** run by the Empower Foundation in Chiang Mai, Thailand is an 'experimental dream-bar' owned and operated by sex workers. It offers a space which is fun, relaxed and non-judgmental with drinks, music, dance and other performances. The bar has ample space to sit and chat, and also a dance floor. The entire space is used to give a new face to advocacy on sex workers' rights with slogans, messages, archives including posted letters, t-shirts and so on. The sex workers at the bar have also been involved in performing skits with messages such as "check-point" which talked about safer sex through usage of condoms. The bar offers a dynamic and activist space disseminating information on sexuality.

In addition to all the entertainment, what is unique about the bar is that it adheres to the Thai Labour Laws and the recommended Occupational Health and Safety Standards. Besides these the bar maintains high standards for physical safety and well-being for its employees and visitors. Women feel privileged to work here as the bar presents a fair and safe working environment and offers social welfare as part of employment, voluntary overtime which is fully paid, 10 paid holidays in addition to 13 public holidays in a year, paid sick leave, no staff salary cuts, and staff are encouraged to form a worker's association or union. The staff have an 8 hour schedule with a 1 hour break for rest, as well as one day off a week.

cabbages and condoms restaurant

The best part about the bar is that it acknowledges sex work as work, promotes rights of sex workers, encourages an environment to talk freely about safer sex and sexuality and is not guided by moralistic notions of sexuality and sex work

The Cabbages and Condoms Restaurant was established to support in part the activities of Population & Community Development Association (PDA) a non-profit organization founded in 1974 by Mechai Viravaidya, the former Thai Minister of Health. The restaurants offer a pleasant dining experience in several locations around Thailand. They are currently in Bangkok, Pattaya and Chiang Rai. Not only do these restaurants offer excellent traditional Thai food and a selection of international cuisines, but they also promote the health and safety aspects of condom use in a fun and amusing manner. All proceeds from the restaurants are used to fund the social development programmes of PDA. PDA supports birth control, environmental conservation, rural development and AIDS awareness.

Cabbages and Condoms is the only restaurant in the world dedicated to birth control. The restaurant was conceptualised to promote better understanding and acceptance of family planning. The idea was to make condoms as common, easily available and accessible to all

as cabbages, in order to counter the population and health related problems in Thailand.

The Cabbages and Condoms restaurant is uniquely decorated with condoms from all over the world plus messages and photos that support family planning. The world's largest collection of national brand condoms is displayed on the walls. The restaurant has cartoons of condoms for various trades and professions woven into the fabric of the carpet which goes up the stairs in the restaurant. Instead of after-dinner mints, there are bowls of condoms located at the exits. The restaurant also has a souvenir shop where rural Thai products as well as souvenirs which promote information on family planning are sold. The management proudly declares, "Our food is guaranteed not to cause pregnancy", a message that is displayed on T-shirts and artefacts for sale. PDA uses the money from sales for AIDS awareness, family planning, preserving the environment, rural reconstruction, youth development, and other laudable causes. So, next time you are in Thailand, go to Cabbages and Condoms. It's a fun place to visit, eat some Condom Salad, and pick up gifts for friends.

JUNE 28, 2009

delhi pride parade

Photographs by **Aditya Bondyopadhyay**

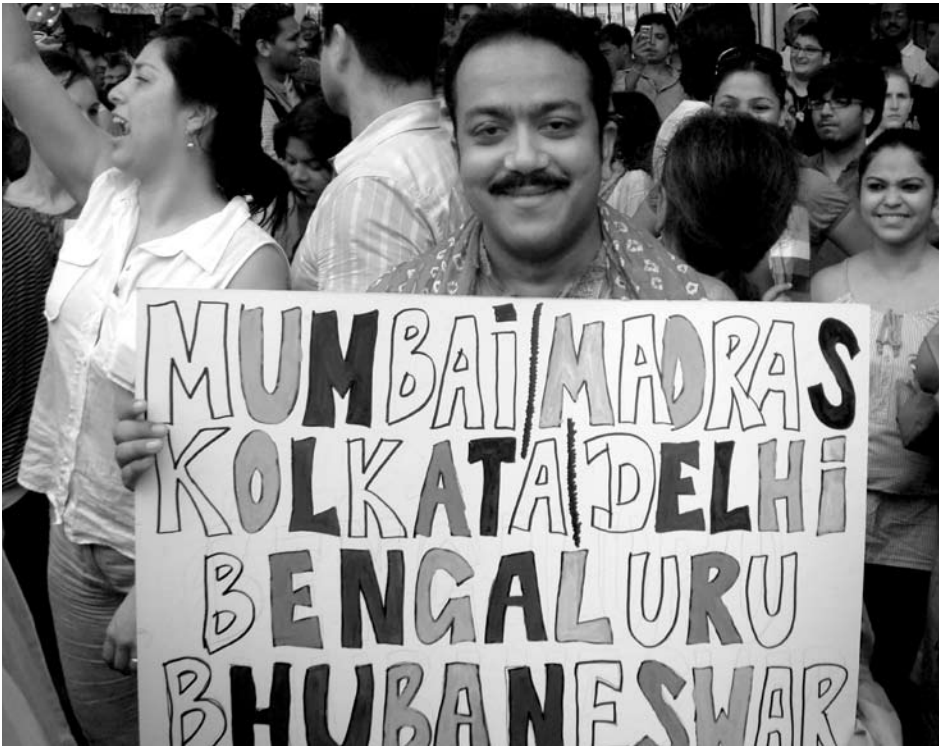


After eight long years of activism and legal battle, the Delhi High Court 'read down' Section 377 that criminalises 'carnal intercourse against the order of Nature' on July 2, 2009. Same sex sexual activity between consenting adults in private is no longer a crime. Hurrah!









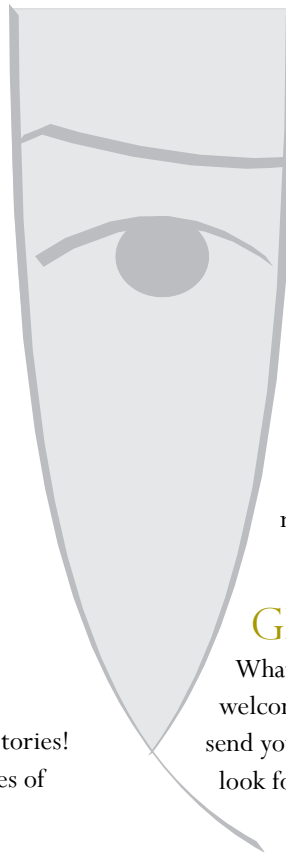


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Calling all Writers! We want your ideas and stories! We are inviting submissions for the next issues of



In Plainspeak. Please indicate which section of the magazine you think your article best fits.

Send in your articles to resourcecentre@tarshi.net. Remember we use gender-neutral and non-judgmental language. To write for the I column, please begin your first sentence with 'I...'.
Calling all Artists! We hope to showcase a diverse range of images throughout the magazine in each issue.

In Plainspeak is calling for images on sexuality for inclusion in the magazine. Poetry is also welcome. Submissions should be sent to resourcecentre@tarshi.net.

GIVE us Your Feedback!
What did you think of this issue of *In Plainspeak*? We welcome your comments, suggestions, and ideas. Please send your feedback to resourcecentre@tarshi.net. We look forward to hearing from you!



The South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality is hosted at TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues).

TARSHI believes that all people have the right to sexual well being and to a self-affirming and enjoyable sexuality.

TARSHI works towards expanding sexual and reproductive choices in people's lives in an effort to enable them to enjoy lives of dignity, freedom from fear, infection and reproductive and sexual health problems. It was founded in 1996 and registered under the Societies Registration Act in 1997. TARSHI runs a phone helpline, conducts trainings and institutes, develops publications, participates in public awareness and education initiatives, and provides technical support to advocacy initiatives. For more information, please visit www.tarshi.net

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