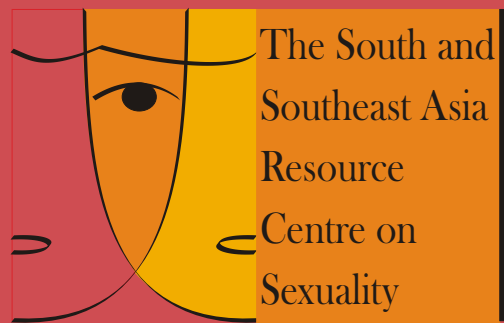


# in plainspeak

TALKING ABOUT *sexuality* IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

2006, Issue 3



Cover:  
mammogram  
by Cynthia Chauhan

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The monsoon has begun! Exciting. Romantic. Dreary. Gentle. Passionate. Sexy. Tedious. The many faces of the monsoon; like the many facets of sexuality. There are many things that affect the facets of sexuality, of what we can and cannot do. The weather of our prejudices, for one. And of our laws, for another. We run into stormy stuff sometimes, and we need to do something about it.

In the Interview, Pan Suiming talks about the current climate surrounding sexuality in China and the factors contributing to it. Issue in Focus takes us to Bangladesh where young people, like elsewhere in the world, are starved for accurate information about sexuality. This issue of *In Plainspeak* looks at a range of sexuality issues, how people think about them and how this affects people’s lives.

One of the main questions we look at this time is: What is the yardstick we use to judge what’s ok and what’s not, sexually speaking? Is it the reproductive potential of the act, the partner’s gender, marital relationship to you, age, social position, skin colour, or race? In former (and not so former) times, all of these have been a sort of gold standard against which the acceptability of sexual activity was decided. Now, the main principle used is that of consent. So, based on the principle of consent, sex that is non-consensual is rape and is a crime. But Indian law considers only non-consensual penile-vaginal intercourse as rape. This leaves out other forms of sexual violence, and also assumes that rape occurs only between men and women, with men always being the perpetrators. The Bigger Picture discusses the pros and cons of making the rape law gender neutral and broadening it to include other sexual acts committed without consent.

Consent sounds a reasonable enough principle to decide the personal and social acceptability of a sexual act, you will say, provided it is given knowing what one is getting into, it makes sense and meaning to the person, and the person is old enough. Old enough? Oops, we are running into bad weather here. Every country has laws about the age at which people are considered capable of doing something – driving, voting, marrying, working for wages, being criminally liable, and giving consent to having sex. Fair enough. We all know this. But what we often do not know is that in many countries the age of consent for homosexual

sex is higher than that for heterosexual sex. Read more about this discrimination in the PolicyAlert.

Another sexual activity where we seem to differentially operationalise consent is when it comes to S & M. Somehow, for many people, all logic seems to fly out of the window, right into the pouring rain, and swirls around in the muddled waters of incomprehension, ignorance and prejudice. In sheer bewilderment people ask, How can anyone want to do *that*? Well, find out in Shades of Grey and Did you Know.

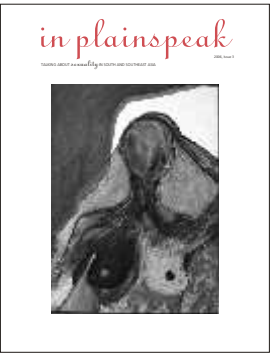
We walk through other stormy territory in the review of *Beautiful Boxer*, a true-life depiction of a man who transitioned into a woman by fighting his way through, both metaphorically and literally. The I Column challenges our complacent notions about sexuality and disability, and, the review of *Chocolate*, written in the late 1920’s about ‘forbidden’ love, makes us wonder if we can read it differently 90 years later.

Through all this, when you pause to think about or absorb the ideas in this issue of *In Plainspeak*, look at the art on the cover and in Brushstrokes. It is created by Cynthia Chauhan who was diagnosed with glaucoma 14 years ago and some years after that with renal cell cancer, and, then, with breast cancer (both of which are in remission). She says, ‘I began to paint following my second cancer diagnosis but as I painted to try to gain perspective on that, I found that painting could express and help me work through living with glaucoma as well. I fear blindness but I have learned that even seemingly inevitable, dreaded realities can carry seeds of unexpected beauty, growing experiences that I might otherwise have missed. And, so, I paint.’

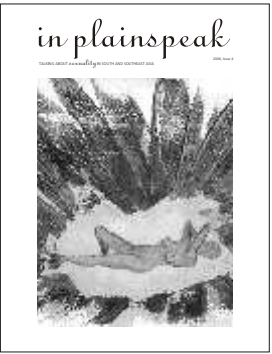
And, so, in our activism, while the world still has seasons of discrimination and violence, let us find unexpected opportunities to set upon the winds the seeds of sexual rights, to grow a world that affirms all of us. As always, we welcome your ideas, contributions, feedback and suggestions.

Radhika Chandiramani

Radhika Chandiramani



2006 Issue 3  
mammogram  
Cynthia Chauhan



2006 Issue 4  
untitled  
Cynthia Chauhan



2007 Issue 1  
untitled  
Cynthia Chauhan

Cynthia Chauhan started drawing and painting five years ago after her second encounter with cancer. She has held several exhibitions of her art and facilitates art workshops.

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. The Resource Centre aims to increase knowledge and scholarship on issues of sexuality, sexual health and sexual wellbeing 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 is part of The Ford Foundation’s Global Dialogue on Sexual Health and Wellbeing. Similar centres are based in Africa, Latin America and North America.

The Resource Centre has developed a range of programmes to enhance scholarship, increase access to information, and further a dialogue on sexuality issues. Every year, the Resource Centre conducts an eight day long conceptual course on sexuality. Seventeen participants from 10 countries attended the Resource Centre’s Third Regional Institute on Sexuality, Society and Culture from April 29 to May 6, 2006 in Hanoi, Vietnam with the Institute for Social Development Studies as the local host. The Applied Study Programme on Sexual Diversity will be conducted from August 23 to September 19, 2006 in collaboration with The GAYa NUSANTARA Foundation in Surabaya, Indonesia. The Resource Centre also houses a library with over 3000 books and material on sexuality. Our website ([www.asiasrc.org](http://www.asiasrc.org)) hosts online moderated discussions on sexuality, news and announcements from the region, links to resources on sexuality, and, the library catalogue. You can also download an electronic version of *In Plainspeak*. For more information on our programmes and events, please visit [www.asiasrc.org](http://www.asiasrc.org).



# Sexuality in China

PAN SUIMING

... AMONG CHINESE  
MARRIED COUPLES  
OVER THE AGE OF  
FIFTY, ALMOST HALF  
OF THEM, IN ALL  
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WHY? IT IS BECAUSE  
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USELESS FOR  
PREGNANCY.



GIVEN THAT TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY IN CHINA IS TABOO, HOW DID YOU BEGIN? WHY DO YOU THINK TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY IS IMPORTANT?

Yes, in the early 1980's it was taboo, but not after 1985. Now, it is only taboo in some kinds of official media, especially on TV and movies. In everyday life, you can almost say everything about sexualities. I have worked as a lecturer and later professor in Renmin University since 1984. For the first three years I was a lecturer in the History Department and then later in the Sociology Department. I began to study sexuality from a historical and cultural perspective which is much easier to be tolerated and understood, and then began to study sexuality in people's everyday life in current contexts.

IN ONE OF YOUR INTERVIEWS YOU HAVE SAID THAT 'THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IS THE FATHER OF THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION'. TELL US MORE.

During the Cultural Revolution, there was no expression of sexuality in any so-called cultural field in China for as long as ten years, although the birth rate was high and the population number was growing up fast. Such kind of strong oppression is a violation of Chinese tradition and the people's will, so it led to a reaction in the form of a sexual revolution. It began in the mid 1980s and covered the following five aspects: the relative separation between sexuality and procreation; the relative separation of marriage and sexuality; the expression of sexuality; the diversity of sexual behaviour; and, the expression of women's sexuality.

Such a sexual revolution was the Chinese people's own choice historically. It fought against the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and the so-called New China Culture of the 1950s (something like the 'puritan culture' in western history). It is a great advancement, because not only did it serve the people's happiness, but it also revived the pre-1750s ancient Chinese sexual culture. By the way, as a researcher who has lived in China for near 60 years, I strongly disagree with the view that the Chinese sexual

As a researcher who has lived in China for near 60 years, I strongly disagree with the view that the Chinese sexual revolution followed the Western one of the 1960s. The two revolutions are very different in their motives, objects, signals, patterns and what drove them.

revolution followed the Western one of the 1960s. The two revolutions are very different in their motives, objects, signals, patterns and what drove them. The only similar aspect is that the proportion of youth within the population had reached the highest point at that time and the youth culture could not be stopped.

HOW HAS THE 'ONE-CHILD POLICY' AFFECTED PEOPLES' SEXUAL LIVES IN CHINA?

I don't know whether the people outside of China will understand my ideas about this or not, but I would like to try with my poor English. There were no religions like Christianity or Islam in China historically. The taboo on sexuality was mainly not the idea and conception of 'sin', but the 'reproduction-ism value' (as I call it) of Confucianism. It indicated any relationship and behavior as abnormal if it did not lead to pregnancy. The example is not only of gay sex, but also oral sex, anal sex, and even foreplay and kissing among heterosexuals. Can my readers believe that among Chinese married couples over the age of fifty, almost half of them, in all of their life, had never once kissed each other while having sex! Why? It is because kissing is considered as useless for pregnancy.

Such a 'reproduction-ism value' came from the so-called

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‘Chinese religion’ of ancestor worship. This was destroyed by the one-child policy firstly and totally and also by the Chinese sexual revolution.

Firstly, when the one-child policy started in the 1980s, the sexual revolution followed. Why did any couple have sex? For what? The idea of sex being for reproduction is prohibited by the Government if I have a child already. So I have to understand and believe that sex is for pleasure only. Thus, all the traditional ideology was broken up. For example, if sex is for birth, any kind of non-marital sex should be harmful not only to the society but also to every individual and ought to be punished, because the sex might bring a child without fatherhood and care. The offspring tree will be cut down. On the other hand, if sex is for pleasure, non-marital sex might be a good affair if I have no pleasure with my wife while I am happy with my extra-marital girl friend, who could blame me? With what kind of reason?

Secondly, the one-child policy produced the legalization of contraception and abortion very easily and fast in a short time of two years after 1980. (Look at America; they are still fighting for this now.) By using contraception and abortion, there were almost no children born outside marriage in China after the 1980s. Thus, how can society find out about any kind of non-marital sex? If I did not know who were doing it, how can I criminalise and punish them? Thus, I lose my main moral weapon. All sexually suppressive morals became foolish enough soon (Again, American Christians understood this. They considered the pill as the knife to cut down God’s hand to control human sexuality.)

Thirdly, what had limited women’s sexuality for at least two thousand years in China? If a woman has to give birth to 10 children on average and feed them and bring them up, did she have any possibility of having time, energy and a good mood to think, talk and practise sex? In that situation, could I imagine any girl to be active even in her marital sex life? Opposition of any non-marital sex would be initiated by women themselves.

However, after 1980, one woman can give birth only one time. This is the basic liberation. The ‘female sexual revolution’ will come soon. Thereby, men could be liberated by the new free women.

And, fourth, because they have only one child, most Chinese parents tend to coddle him/her and relax the sexual moral limitations. This is a very important source of the sexual revolution among youth.

YOU HAVE SAID THAT PEOPLE HAVE BECOME MORE OPEN TO TALK ABOUT SEXUALITY. WHAT KIND OF CHANGES HAVE YOU OBSERVED?

After 2000, I think there is a coming of a ‘sexualized era’ characterized by the following: more open expression of sexuality, embedding sexual meanings into lots of phenomena, distinguishing sexual difference among different genders, an increasing usage of sexual words and phrases, and taking sexuality as a tool of expression of some kinds of social ideology, such as individualism. If one reads Chinese, one could read every kind of detail about sex and sexuality in thousands of web sites. If one lives in China anywhere and understands Chinese oral language, one would hear thousands of sexual jokes, the jokes will even appear in mobile phone text messages.

On the other hand, sexual interactions and practices are highly consumerised, sexuality is regarded as a consumable especially in the world of fashion and by the media. Meanwhile, sexual nativism is emerging. Nativism indicates the local culture’s reaction to ‘Westernization’. That means some Chinese people have started to oppose the sexual revolution in the name of the sexually repressive ‘tradition

of the late Qing dynasty’ (1750 - 1919). This kind of nativism was not there in the 1980s and 1990s.

HAVE YOU OBSERVED SOME SPECIFIC TRENDS IN SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS OR ATTITUDES UNIQUE TO THE MIDDLE CLASS IN CHINA?

There is still not a ‘middle class’ in China with the true meaning of this term. Chinese people often take the ‘urban white collars’ as ‘middle class’. There have been great changes in their sexual behaviors and attitudes. A few of them can try anything which is/was regarded as ‘abnormal’ by mainstream ideology, such as membership of clubs where one can exchange partners, one night stands, group sex, male strip shows and S&M etc. However, they occupy only a small percentage even among the ‘urban white collars’. They are not very young, maybe around 30 years old.

HOW DO GENDER AND AGE AFFECT THE SEXUAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS OF PEOPLE IN CHINA?

There is still not a ‘women’s sex revolution’ in China. Only after 2000, a few young women wrote some novels with sexual descriptions which became known as ‘body writing’ (means they write by using their body, not pen). According to our survey done in 2000, comparatively speaking, in sexual life, the wife is still ‘the second sex’ without a positive role and initiative.

For example, amongst the women respondents, 52.4% regarded pre-marital sex as a violation against the moral system; 97.7% thought people should not have sex out of marriage; 95.3% did not believe in having sex without love; 64.9% considered that sex should be man-initiated and only 3.8% initiated sex in their actual sex life. On the other hand, the male respondents minds were more ‘opened’ in these fields.

In terms of age, according to our survey in 2000 among people from 20 to 64 years of age, there are significant differences among them in terms of sexual attitudes and

behaviors. Premarital sexual behaviors happened more frequently among young people. Men at around 30 years of age and women at around 40 are more likely to have sex out of marriage. Men aged 25 to 29 years are more likely to buy sex from female sex workers.

Sexual attitudes have significant correlation with age, education, gender and urban/rural location. Those who are young, well educated, men, in urban areas are much more open than others.

IN YOUR LONGITUDINAL STUDY ON CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS, WHAT DID YOU OBSERVE?

That study produced a book with 250,000 Chinese words. It is quite difficult to talk about it in a short paragraph. However, if you want, I would like to say: there was no sexual revolution among the college students until 2001, although it occurred among non-college going young people of the same age. It is because, in China, college students are very different from other young people. The students were only four percent of the same-aged youth in 2000. They were the so-called ‘spiritual aristocrats’ and more conservative than the youth who worked and lived in the real world.

On the other hand, students have to live together in the dormitory administered by the university officers, six or eight people in one room. They don’t have cars. There are no

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private parties on campus. Most of them have no relations or friends in the city where they study. So, in one sentence, they have no way to liberate themselves sexually.

WHAT IS THE STATE OF RESEARCH ON SEXUALITY IN CHINA? HOW CAN IT BE IMPROVED?

It is growing and requires more support and more researchers, especially sociologists and anthropologists to be involved. It has advanced a lot. There is quite a lot of good research on sexuality in China, but rarely known by the other countries because of the problem with language. Moreover, more and more young scholars are interested in this topic.

Firstly, sexuality research still lacks a supportive environment. Very few official organizations, companies, media, and even NGOs would like to support research on sexuality. Thus, few young people are able to engage in research even though they maybe interested. Secondly, lack of access to international papers and books and the difficulty of communication because of language and other problems becomes an obstacle for the development of sexuality

research. To bridge China with the international world on sexuality related research and work is very important. The best way (maybe the only way) is to encourage young staff to give courses and classes on sexuality in universities.

HOW HAS HIV AFFECTED DISCUSSIONS ON SEXUALITY?

In China, the sexual revolution came in the middle of 1980s. AIDS came in the early 1990s. So, Dr. HuangYingying and I think, sexuality would be ‘AIDS-lized’, if people say sexuality only when they mentioned AIDS and STD. The only convenience brought by AIDS is that I can speak about anal sex publicly in my lectures. And more health workers speak out about sex, anal sex, etc in the public sphere. Besides, sex work and MSM issues are also discussed.

WHAT IS THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALITY IN CHINA?

Traditionally, gay men were looked down upon morally, but were not considered sinful or criminalized. Few people cared about lesbians. There has not been any mention of homosexuality in Chinese Law, although some gay men were arrested and put to ‘labour reform’ in the 1950s and 1960s under charges of ‘hooliganism’.

YOU HAVE DONE EXTENSIVE RESEARCH ON SEX WORKERS AND THEIR RIGHTS TO LABOUR. WHAT KIND OF SEX WORKERS’ RIGHTS DO YOU SUPPORT?

Because they have the rights to labour, so they are legal and have every kind of rights in every aspect and every field, same as me, a professor.

IN INDIA WE HAVE CAMPAIGNS AGAINST CENSORSHIP, THE SODOMY LAW AND THE LAWS AGAINST SEX WORK. ARE THERE ANY SIMILAR CAMPAIGNS IN CHINA?

The issues are same, but the social contexts are different. Could I really think there is anybody, whether an

To construct a false conflict between pleasure and health is the new weapon of the Christian-Judaism to fight against sexual rights.

organization or individual in China who has any chance, ability and way to fight against any Law in any field?

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR INFLUENCES ON YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEOLOGY?

The philosophy of *Yin-Yang*, modern Marxism and post-constructionism.

WHAT IS THE YIN AND YANG THEORY? WHAT IS ITS CONNECTION TO SEXUALITY?

Excuse me, with my level of English, I will not be able to explain *Yin-Yang* theory clearly. Speaking very simply, *Yin* and *Yang* combine together at any time and forever. *Yin* does not equal to female absolutely and *Yang* does not indicate male only. However, love-making or having sex is the course of combination of *Yin* and *Yang*.

Most ancient and many current Chinese people, especially men, believe such a philosophy. So they take having sex as a natural, even a good way of ‘keeping one’s health’. There was no tradition of asceticism like Catholicism in Chinese history, except amongst some Buddhist priests.

HOW DO YOU INCORPORATE THE NOTION OF SEXUAL RIGHTS AND PLEASURE INTO HEALTH RELATED WORK IN CHINA? HOW DO YOU ADVISE PEOPLE TO DO THAT IN THEIR WORK?

I teach sexual rights in every lecture and claim it in every paper. Chinese readers would remember I was the first person in China and the only one to disseminate this idea and the term, since 1986 until 3 years ago. For example, one of my papers (1987) was about the ‘sexual rights of girls over 14 years old’. It is still cited though it was prohibited to be published by many media.

I talk about pleasure in my papers, lectures and during media interviews. However, the situation does not change quickly. The main reason is that the workers in the fields concerned with sexuality are medically trained for a long

time. In the Chinese context, the medical doctors consider sexual pleasure as a harmful factor, especially if it is compared with the so-called ‘health’. So, at least in my country, we have to wake up the people. The real issue is not whether ‘pleasure’ or ‘health’ is better and more important; it is that we still do not get both, and we even have no hope to get any one of them!

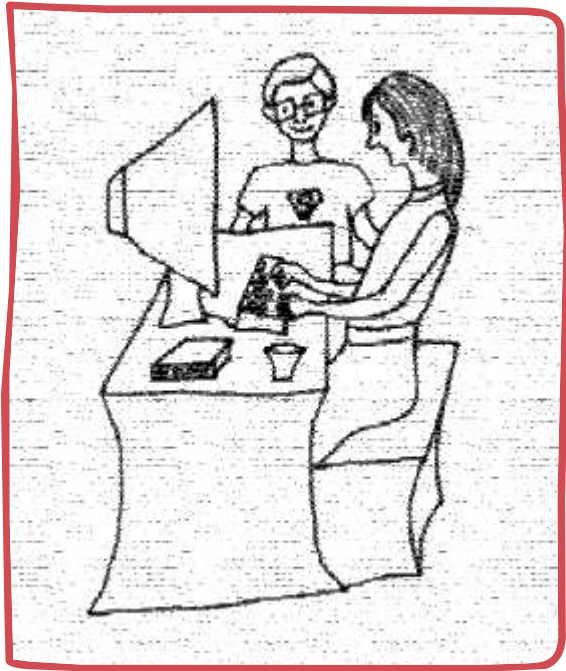
In my mind, to construct a false conflict between pleasure and health is the new weapon of the Christian-Judaism to fight against sexual rights. To Chinese people, this is the real and most dangerous ‘cultural aggression from the West’. Even if I am left with only one tooth, I would bite such an aggression.

**Pan Suiming** is a Professor at the Sociology Department and the Director of the Institute for Research on Sexuality and Gender at the Renmin University of China in Beijing. The principal researcher of more than 20 national and international research projects, he has published thirteen books and more than 200 papers on sexuality. His research covers theories on sexuality and gender (especially post-modernism), quantitative and qualitative methodology, cultural and historical studies of sexualities, Chinese people’s attitudes and behaviours around sexuality, and, sex work in China. He has also translated Kinsey’s and Laumann’s books on men’s and women’s sexual behaviour into Chinese.



# Talking Sex:

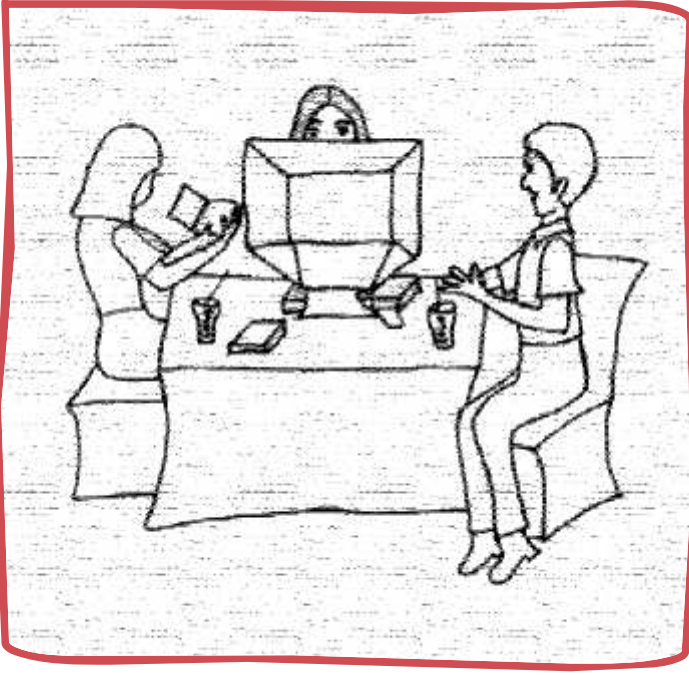
Issues amongst Young People in Bangladesh



IN AN OFTEN RIGID CULTURE LIKE BANGLADESH IT IS DIFFICULT TO ARRIVE AT A BALANCE BETWEEN TALKING ABOUT SAFE AND HEALTHY SEX AND AT THE SAME TIME NOT BEING ACCUSED BY PARENTS AND GUARDIANS OF 'ENCOURAGING SEXUAL PROMISCUITY'.

In making the important transition from childhood to adulthood, it is necessary for young people to acquire the knowledge and develop the attitudes and skills to help them participate and find a place for themselves as members of the household and the larger community. To do this, they need to gain experience in decision making, assess risks and consequences of their decisions and actions, as well as interact and communicate with peers, sexual partners and adults. Young people especially of low-income communities such as in Bangladesh are vulnerable to risk factors that affect their reproductive and sexual health and well-being. It is basically the lack of information and counseling and the shortage of programs that focus directly on sexuality and sexual behaviours that increase this risk and drive young people to risky behaviour.

TANYA HUQ SHAHRIAR



Illustrations by Taranibala Kongbrailatpam

Working for a leading NGO in reproductive health in Bangladesh, the Marie Stopes Clinic Society, gave me a different perspective on the issues of sexuality and health in a country like Bangladesh. Working with young people is my passion and interest. Wherever I went, in all the classes and socio-economic strata (upper, middle and lower strata, as it is known in my country) a number of things kept striking me – sex is a terribly taboo subject in my culture even after marriage; young people are engaging in premarital sex more and more these days especially with the advent of the global cable culture; and, there is a terrible lack of access to information about sexuality and reproductive health related issues in Bangladesh.

Even in the rural and urban areas amongst the lower socio

economic groups it is still common for girls to get married off by the time they are 15 years old, without even a minimum knowledge of sexuality, reproductive health, family planning and the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. This makes them more vulnerable to spending their lives in the pain of battling sexual and reproductive problems and not even knowing who to go to for proper counseling and treatment.

I remember my own adolescent days and how I was always given the impression that sex and sexuality were not good things to talk or ask about. In fact the first time I asked my mother what a condom was her guilty reaction and immediate change of subject made me feel really bad. My friends and I discovered the forbidden pleasures of sex

EVEN IN THE RURAL AND URBAN AREAS AMONGST THE LOWER SOCIO ECONOMIC GROUPS IT IS STILL COMMON FOR GIRLS TO GET MARRIED OFF BY THE TIME THEY ARE 15 YEARS OLD, WITHOUT EVEN A MINIMUM KNOWLEDGE OF SEXUALITY, REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, FAMILY PLANNING AND THE DANGERS OF SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES.

through secretly watching porn and reading magazines and experiencing the changes in our own bodies as we grew older. But we had no one to ask questions to and no one to advise us.

Looking back on those years – the sheer proscriptions against accepting the normal changes in my body and repressing my sexuality – made me realize how easy it was for young people to make inappropriate and even dangerous choices as I had seen many of my friends do. With this in mind, taking the help of a medical specialist on sexuality and reproductive health, I started a web-based email column tagged on to the organizational website. The address was write-to-us@citechcho.net and it was hosted on the Marie Stopes website. Marie Stopes had already launched programs on reproductive health with young people in the slums. Now the organization wanted to raise awareness amongst higher-income urban adolescents and young people on sexuality and reproductive health to enable healthy and informed reproductive and sexual lives. The email column was basically like an agony aunt column that a lot of magazines run; the difference was that it was online

and it focused on young people and sexuality. This was quite unique in Bangladesh. We also advertised informally in cyber cafes and educational institutions as I really wanted this to work as an information and sharing platform for young people to discuss a very important subject in their lives and maybe help them to make the right decisions.

The column began in June 2003 and ran till the end of 2004. Though we were a bit unsure of what the response would be, from the second week onwards the mails and queries started pouring in. We would receive about 25 queries each week. The majority of them were from young men aged 19 to 30 years. The most common query was regarding erectile dysfunctions or in their words ‘what is the safest amount of time one can get it up and last during sex so that we are not termed weak’. It seems that the biggest worry amongst the young men was whether their sexual organs were large enough and whether they could hold on and satisfy their

ONLY ABOUT FIVE PERCENT OF THE QUERIES WERE FROM YOUNG WOMEN, AGAIN PROVING HOW DIFFICULT IT IS FOR THEM TO OPEN UP AND TALK TO SOMEONE. MOST OF THESE WERE FROM YOUNG WOMEN ABOUT TO EMBARK ON A SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP (WITHIN OR OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE) AND WANTING TO KNOW ABOUT AVAILABILITY OF CONTRACEPTION AND ALSO WAYS TO PLEASURE THEIR PARTNERS.

partners and future wives long enough. It made me realize again how great the lack of sex education and information is in my country and how in many cases these young men just wanted to talk with and be reassured by someone. Where medical help was sought I consulted with my colleague, the doctor, and in certain necessary cases we recommended a visit to Marie Stopes clinics for specialized and confidential treatment.

Only about five percent of the queries were from young women, again proving how difficult it is for them to open up and talk to someone. Most of these were from young women about to embark on a sexual relationship (within or outside of marriage) and wanting to know about availability of contraception and also ways to pleasure their partners. One particularly poignant email was from an 18 year old who was about to embark on her first sexual relationship with a young man she felt she was serious about, and she wanted to talk about the misgivings and confusions she felt. I tried responding to her as I would my own sister, especially

IT SEEMED THAT BY TALKING TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH EMAIL AND GIVING THEM PROPER ADVICE WE COULD START IN A SMALL WAY TO PROVIDE THEM WITH INFORMATION AND THEREBY ENSURE THEIR RIGHT TO GOOD HEALTH - WITH A PERSPECTIVE BASED ON THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION RATHER THAN ONE FOCUSED ON ABSTINENCE AND CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TABOOS.

focusing on the issues of safer sex, HIV and STIs. Working on this email service made me realize also that how really uninformed young people were about the risks of unprotected sex and STIs and we started to talk about that too to some of our ‘regulars’. It was also immensely gratifying to receive thankyou notes from some of the young people who we had managed to help or just reassure.

In an often rigid culture like Bangladesh it is difficult to arrive at a balance between talking about safe and healthy sex and at the same time not being accused by parents and guardians of ‘encouraging sexual promiscuity’. Enabling access to sexuality information, contraceptives, family planning products and including these in the policies for young people is all part of providing opportunities for reproductive and sexual health and well-being. It seemed that by talking to the young people through email and giving them proper advice we could start in a small way to provide them with information and thereby ensure their right to good health – with a perspective based on the right to information rather than one focused on abstinence and cultural and religious taboos.

**Tanya Huq Shahriar** has been working in the field of development in Bangladesh for several years and is currently on the Communications team of ActionAid Bangladesh, a leading international NGO. She received her MA in Social Anthropology from the School of Oriental and Africal Studies (SOAS), University of London and has worked on reproductive health, human rights and gender.



# Too Queer or not Queer Enough?

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.

One of the issues that is controversial is that of S&M, frequently used as a short form for BDSM (for those who are wondering what this is, please go the Did you Know section). When it comes to BDSM, there are usually two reactions – people either get a gleam in their eye or look disgusted. Anything that is not vanilla sex is dismissed as abusive. Which of course brings us to the question of what is the standard by which we judge the acceptability of a sexual activity.

Today people claim rights on the basis of an identity – heterosexual, woman, lesbian, etc. That is, on the basis of what they *are*. But they are still discriminated against on the basis of what they *do*. So, people who practise BDSM, irrespective of their gender or sexuality, are left outside the pale. This is not to say that we are suggesting that sexually, anything goes. What we are asking is: what is the basis on which we decide what is acceptable?



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ACCEPTABILITY OF A SEXUAL ACTIVITY?

DEVIDAS

## Because I *Don't* Have a Voice

Came across a fabulous book today – *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*. It's an excellent read and very diverse in its spread from conceptual writing to personal narratives via stories of struggles. Felt a bit sad though. Like others before it, this collection too ignores all us BDSMers. In the introduction the editors note, 'For far too long, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have simply been the distant and hypothetical theories and ideas, looked upon either with pity, curiosity or disdain.' Hey – spare a thought for us BDSMers. Even the marginalised seem to forget about us.

The rise of the queer movement suggested there was space for us – to finally escape the world of alphabets ... BDSM, LGBT, GLBT, LGBTK, LGBTXYZ ... whatever. But maybe it was too early for us to celebrate. Queer politics in India still ends up being LGBTK and transgender politics. Maybe it's because there are not enough BDSMers out there ... but you still don't feel like there's space to discuss BDSM in queer groups. I guess it's easier if you're a gay leatherman or a lesbian domme, but what if you're a heterosexual BDSMer. Maybe you even live up to the hetero normative ideal ... marriage, children, blah blah. That definitely doesn't sound queer ... but your sexual practices and identities are still classified as pathological disorders. Queer but not queer enough? Or maybe too queer!

Khanna's piece, in the same collection, though is refreshing. If who I fuck doesn't matter, *how* I do it shouldn't ... or even



YOU STILL DON'T FEEL LIKE THERE'S SPACE TO DISCUSS BDSM IN QUEER GROUPS. I GUESS IT'S EASIER IF YOU'RE A GAY LEATHERMAN OR A LESBIAN DOMME, BUT WHAT IF YOU'RE A HETEROSEXUAL BDSMER.

if I don't. Even if I like to be teased and humiliated; tied and whipped; trampled and fucked . . . whatever. Like Khanna, I wish I could ditch the label (BDSM) too . . . but right now I need to belong, to be heard and to have a voice.

Of Brands and Labels

BDSM, even as an umbrella term is too vague. Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sado-Masochism. There's a whole lot there. Where do I fit in? Do I need to fit in? Do I really need to label myself? Can I label myself? Where do I begin? I'm attracted to women as of now – so I assume that makes me heterosexual. I long to be dominated – so that makes me a submissive. Am definitely not a switch! I hope to live in an unequal relationship with a mistress – that would make me a slave. I like to be fucked and used and shared, so a slut I am. I love to be whipped and hurt, so a pain Slut or a bottom. I crave being bound in latex and PVC and anything else – guess that makes me a gimp. I enjoy being ridden – horse or pony? Even a live dildo?

I dream of surrendering myself completely to a dominant woman – maybe I'm a female supremacist. I'm definitely a foot worshipper, a shoe fetishist, a pussy-licker. Every time I see a stiletto, I think of deep throating it. Forget breasts – I'm a foot, pussy and ass boy. When I was a child, Wonder Woman excited me as did the snobby Veronica from those ubiquitous Archie comics (Betty was just too boring and vanilla!). Growing up, I was always attracted to the 'wrong woman' – the one who treated me badly. Liz Taylor as Cleopatra kept me awake many a night, as did *Venus in Furs* –

my favourite classic. Discovering the Internet was almost manna from heaven. I realised there was a world full of people like me. Now I've come to terms with the fact that I crave what others call an 'abusive' relationship. I need what others call 'violence'. I don't know about you, but when I hear Jessica Simpson singing 'one of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you', all I can say is, 'Please Ma'am, can I have some more?'

A Question of Consent

'Did you get turned on by the Abu-Ghraib pictures?' asked a friend who's still not too comfortable with my 'quirks' (as she puts it politely!). 'Ewwwwwww – of course not! What kind of a person would get turned on by that?' The irony of my words was quite sickening. I've probably seen far more violent and brutal images on the thousands of BDSM and femdom websites I've surfed. Any dominatrix there would make Private Lyddie England look like a girl scout. And yet – I was disgusted by Abu Ghraib. In fact there was no confusion or conflict in my mind whatsoever.

Growing up, I remember reading Uncle Tom's cabin and getting very confused. Slavery was reprehensible but parts of the book turned me on. I wasn't quite sure how to react. In history class, feudalism and whipping did the same. But by

I CRAVE WHAT OTHERS CALL AN 'ABUSIVE' RELATIONSHIP. I NEED WHAT OTHERS CALL 'VIOLENCE'. I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT WHEN I HEAR JESSICA SIMPSON SINGING 'ONE OF THESE DAYS THESE BOOTS ARE GONNA WALK ALL OVER YOU', ALL I CAN SAY IS, 'PLEASE MA'AM, CAN I HAVE SOME MORE?'

now, I know the importance of *consent* and Abu Ghraib is not confusing or contradictory in the least. I may get gratified with treatment far 'worse' than the Iraqi detainees in the prison suffered, but I chose that and I enjoy it. They had no choice in the matter. The quantum of violence is not the issue – consent is. Most BDSMers understand that. We may have rape fantasies but they're precisely that – fantasies. Some radical feminists don't understand that – they equate the violence of BDSMers with violence against women. The classic 'Against SadoMasochism' talks about SM as an offshoot of the patriarchal order. This, of course, gets more complicated in a femdom BDSM relationship with the man as bottom. While the pro-dommes may simply do this to fulfil male fantasies (and thus be co-opted by the patriarchal order), that still doesn't explain the large number of lifestyle-dommes.

Maybe some of us are just wired this way – we weren't abused children, we're not mentally ill or naïve pawns in the broader patriarchal scheme. We're not violent psychopaths and we do know the difference between a mistress-slave relationship and institutionalised or colonial slavery; *and* between Abu Ghraib and a BDSM scene.

'Spanner' in the Works

Read *Dorothy's friend goes to law school*. It discusses the angst of a gay Harvard law student. Amongst the points it makes well is how the law refuses to recognise gay people except where their choices are criminalised. As if gay people don't have jobs, buy property or breach contracts. And yet, when I think of BDSM and the law – I feel a bit envious. In a large number of countries, same-sex relations are no longer criminalised. In some there are even sexual orientation non-discrimination clauses in the law. Yet even in these progressive countries, BDSM and the law tend to have an antagonistic relationship, or at best a mutually exclusive one. The Spanner case in the UK is a good illustration. In 1987, 16 gay BDSMers were arrested and charged with a number of crimes. All the BDSM activities were conducted privately but the police found videotapes of the men engaging in BDSM and charged them with assault. Though 'consent' was raised as a defence, it was rejected by the

Court on the grounds of 'public policy'. Interestingly, one of the 16 men was convicted solely on the grounds of having aided and abetted others in his own assault. Almost as bizarre as India's criminalisation of attempt to commit suicide, but the irony was completely lost on the UK Court. There have been other cases as well and the judgements have been inconsistent. The present situation in the UK is that the law does not recognise BDSM as an exception to assault charges. SadoMasochistic activity is an illegal assault if it results in marks or injuries which are 'more than transient and trifling'.

Where does that leave us in India? Groups are still trying to get 'unnatural offences' away from our criminal law. Any chance that we might be able to argue BDSM and consent as an exception to assault and causing hurt? Asking for a bit much? Like with some child rights groups around Section 377, BDSM groups (if and when they do organise themselves in a campaign) are bound to run into the women's movement on the defence of consent. And rightly so – with the huge problem of violence against women, a defence of consent to any assault is not conceivable in India. Anyway, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it; right

MAYBE SOME OF US ARE JUST WIRED THIS WAY – WE WEREN'T ABUSED CHILDREN, WE'RE NOT MENTALLY ILL OR NAÏVE PAWNS IN THE BROADER PATRIARCHAL SCHEME. WE'RE NOT VIOLENT PSYCHOPATHS AND WE DO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MISTRESS-SLAVE RELATIONSHIP AND INSTITUTIONALISED OR COLONIAL SLAVERY; AND BETWEEN ABU GHRAIB AND A BDSM SCENE.

WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US IN INDIA? GROUPS ARE STILL TRYING TO GET ‘UNNATURAL OFFENCES’ AWAY FROM OUR CRIMINAL LAW. ANY CHANCE THAT WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO ARGUE BDSM AND CONSENT AS AN EXCEPTION TO ASSAULT AND CAUSING HURT? ASKING FOR A BIT MUCH?

now the law is blind to BDSM. Forget assault – even pornography is a problem. If I get caught with all the femdom art, pictures and movies I have on my computer, I’ll have a tough time convincing some judge that I’m not a sick pervert.

The various campaigns supporting the petition challenging Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code recognise that the law evolves in society. Thus the emphasis on public campaigning on challenging ‘natural’ and ‘normal’. Whether it be the gay pride parade in Kolkata or *Summer in my Veins* or even Kaanta Bai’s cameo in *Kal Ho Na Ho*, all these eventually permeate through the clichéd and over-hyped blindfold of justice. Judges and legislators too read the newspapers and watch television and movies.

Will the revolution ever be televised?

What hope does that leave for BDSMers? Is there even any caricature of BDSM on Indian television – the closest I can think of is the advert for *Jeevansathi.com* (a matrimonial match making web portal) which shows a spoilt wife talking to her husband as one would do to a pet dog, and making him do her bidding. The advert ends with the line – ‘Don’t marry the worst mistake of your life’. The advert could have been so much better had it said something like, ‘whatever you

want... we can find it for you’. Anyway, its sheer existence makes me wonder if this was the only outlet for some poor submissive ad-maker living his dreams though his copy for the advert. A number of references to ‘*Joru ka Ghulam*’ etc come to mind in older Hindi films. *Pakeezah* remains a foot fetishist’s dream, but there is little significant reference to any sort of BDSM in popular Hindi cinema or television.

The little that I’ve seen of American and British television and cinema suggests that the situation is only a few steps ahead there. There is little representation of BDSM that is neither caricature nor demonisation. (*The Piano Teacher* is a recent exception – for most part!). Of course there are little bits here and there and a number of Internet websites are devoted to clips and sequences in mainstream cinema and television that have reference to BDSM related activities. No chance however of a BDSM *Will and Grace* let alone a main character like in *Six Feet Under*. It was a pleasant surprise then to watch *Desperate Housewives* the other day where an important character (Rex) visits a neighbour who also moonlights as an occasional sex-worker, gets cuffed and trampled upon by her, in wonderful stilettos ... all done tastefully (albeit not for long enough!), and with no moral judgement attached. Maybe, there’s some hope for us after all. In the meanwhile, the revolution may not be televised, but for us BDSMers, it will certainly be webcammed.

**Devidas** is my pen name. I apologise for not using my own name. Being on the margins and watching some in the queer movement has been a great source of inspiration. I hope it will inspire me sufficiently to be able to meaningfully engage with and within the queer movement, as also to write under my own name. Until then, comments are welcome at [bdsmindia@yahoo.com](mailto:bdsmindia@yahoo.com). I would also like to acknowledge my partner’s support which makes a lot of my dreams possible.

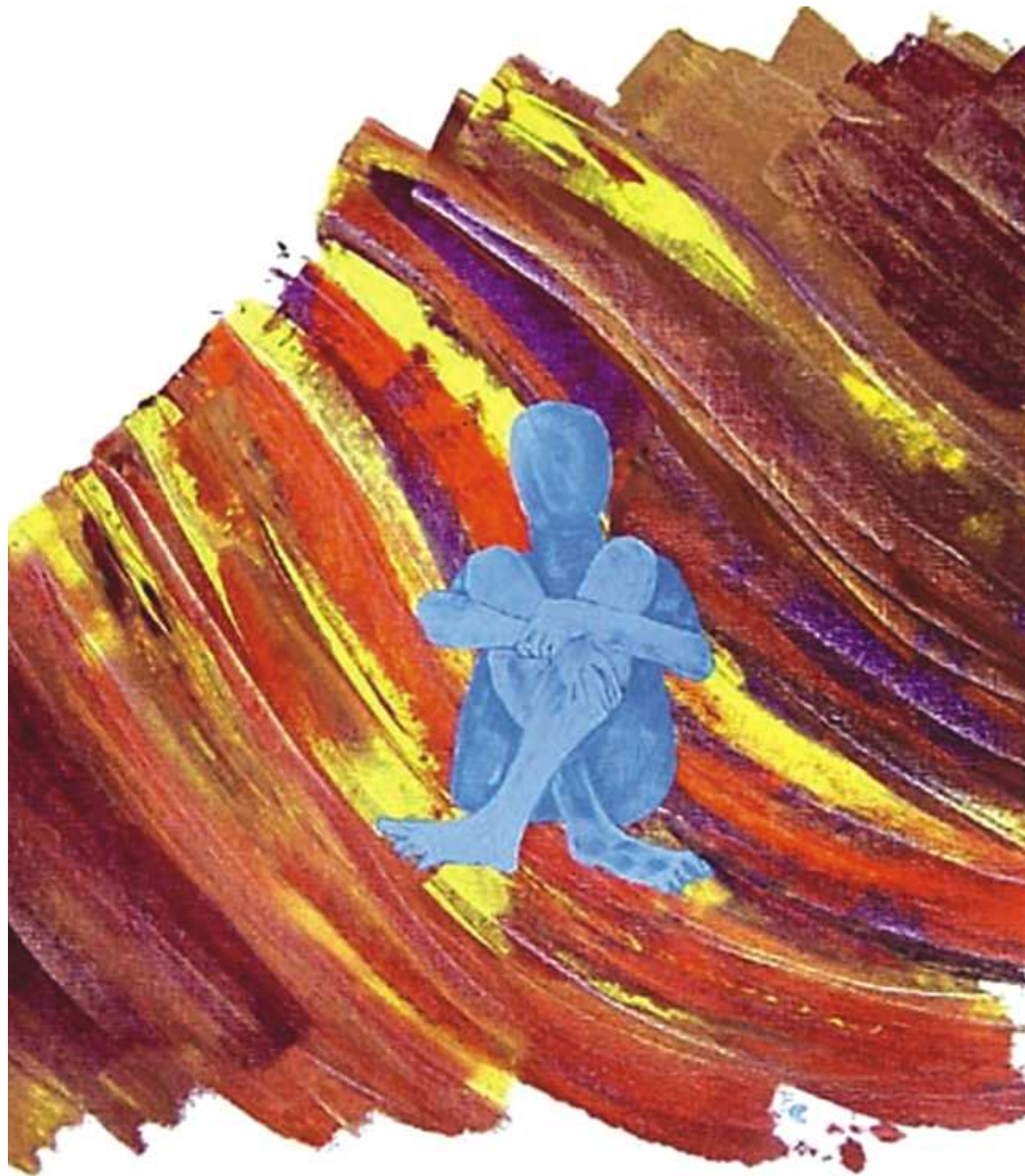


CYNTHIA CHAUHAN

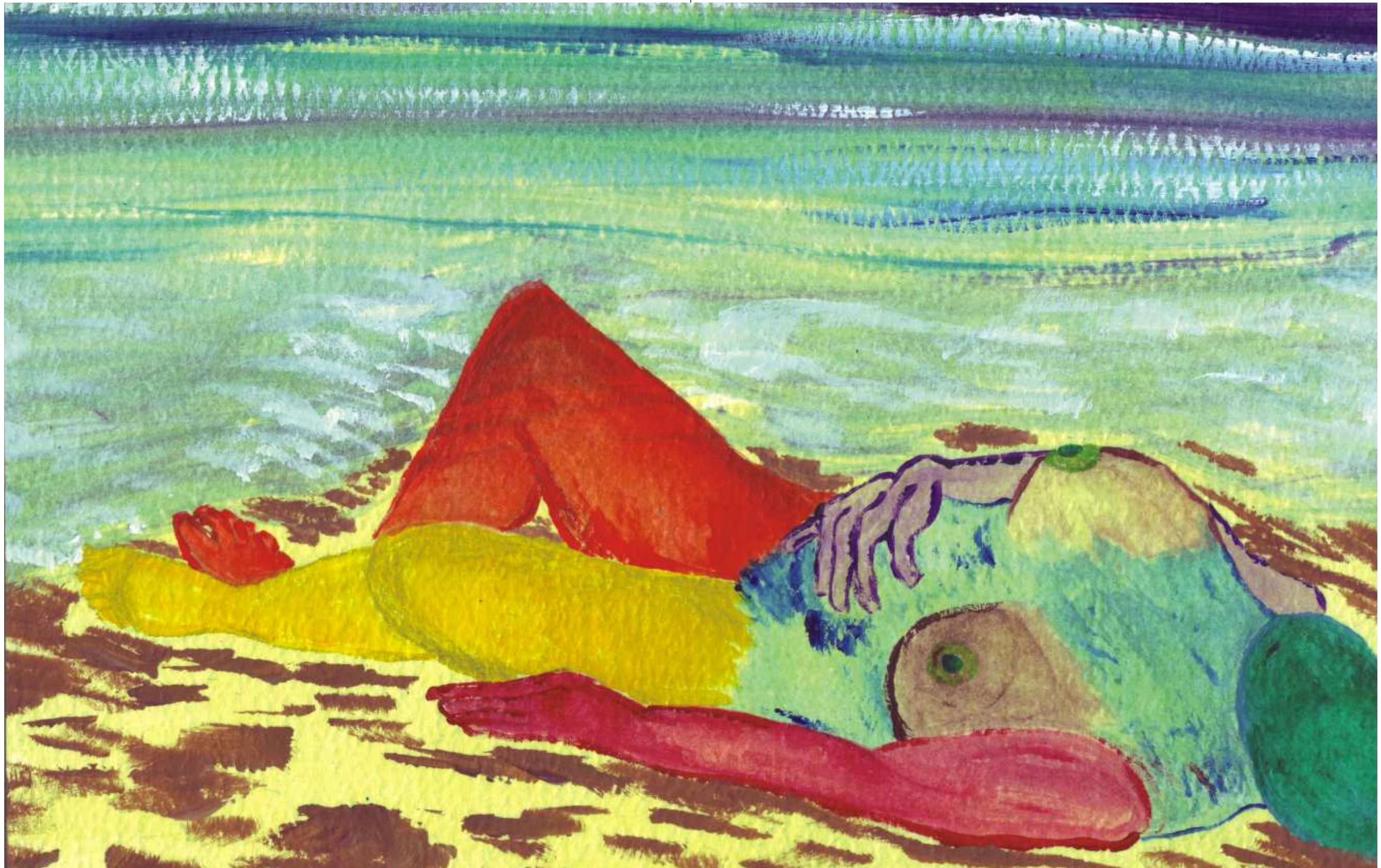
paintings

‘I draw and paint not only to nurture and free my spirit but also to encounter hidden parts of myself that I might otherwise ignore or not know. Because it has become such a meaningful part of my life, I facilitate group workshops to offer others space to encounter themselves through art. I have no training, just passion’.





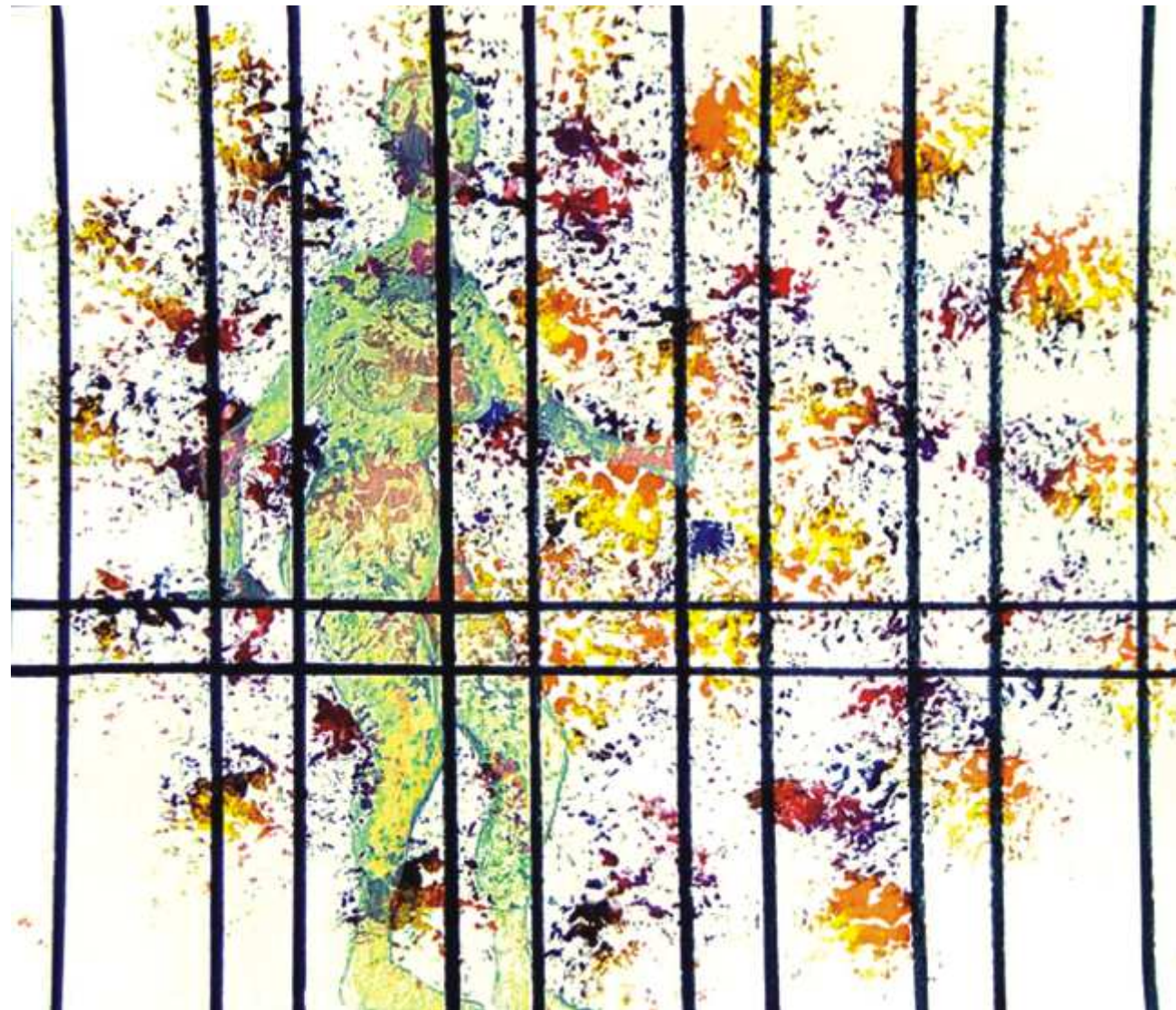












# Revisiting Gender Neutrality

## in Laws relating to Sexual Assault

WHAT NEEDS TO BE EMPHASIZED, CUTTING ACROSS ALL THOSE VULNERABLE TO SEXUAL ASSAULT, IS THAT CONSENT SHOULD MEAN THE UNEQUIVOCAL VOLUNTARY AGREEMENT TO ENGAGE IN THE SEXUAL ACTIVITY IN QUESTION.

LAXMI MURTHY

Should law reflect society as it is, or sketch a vision of society as it should be? A bit of both, perhaps. The debate around gender neutrality in rape laws would appear to be a tussle between these positions. Taking recourse to clichés, it could be proposed that the truth lies somewhere in between.

Reform in the rape law is not new to the women's movement in India. In fact, it galvanized women's organizations around the country in the late 1970s. The countrywide campaign launched in 1979 in what came to be known as the 'Mathura Case' brought rape on to the public agenda. The rape of a 17 year-old *adivasi* girl by local policemen near Bombay and the subsequent acquittal of the rapists led to fervent protests against patriarchal notions in the judiciary. Women's groups all over the country protested against this judgement, and demanded a re-trial as well as far-reaching amendments to the rape law, particularly to provisions dealing with custodial rape.

The amendment in 1983 following this campaign led to some changes in the Indian Evidence Act (IEA). Prior to this, the burden of proof to establish the commission of rape by the accused was wholly on the prosecution, and the

definition of 'custody' was restricted to police stations, and did not include hospitals, remand homes or jails. Following the amendment in 1983, in cases of custodial rape, the burden of proof (to prove that rape was not committed) shifted to the accused. Shifting the burden of proof on to the accused is a departure from criminal jurisprudence in all democratic countries, which presumes a person innocent until proven guilty by due process of law. While women's groups may feel (justifiably) impatient and disillusioned with the law as applicable in women's cases, especially violence against women, we must not lose sight of larger democratic principles. It is also significant that a study by the Peoples' Union for Democratic Rights, Delhi, *Custodial Rape: A Report on the Aftermath* (May 1994) which looks at the custodial rape cases in Delhi in the 10 years after the amendment, found that barring two convictions by the High Court, the accused policemen in all cases were acquitted and reinstated in uniform. The defense in all cases relied on the past sexual history of the complainant to demolish the credibility of the woman who was raped.

It was after two decades of sustained campaigning that the Lok Sabha passed the Indian Evidence (Amendment) Bill,

2002 deleting Section 155(4) of the archaic Indian Evidence Act, 1872, which permitted the person accused of rape to prove that ‘the victim was of generally immoral character’.

Hopefully, it will not take another 20 years to overhaul the laws related to rape. Women’s groups, from the early 1990s, have made attempts to broaden the current definition of rape as ‘penetration of the vagina by the penis’ to ‘sexual assault’, which includes other forms of sexual violence that can be as traumatic. Recent events like the sexual violence perpetrated on a mass scale on Muslim women in Gujarat in 2002 – for which few cases have been registered and even fewer are likely to reach the stage of conviction – have underlined the need to broaden the definition of ‘rape’. Yet, some concerns remain about whether replacing the term rape with ‘sexual assault’ can convey the seriousness of rape, or whether it will be diluted in the anxiety to include every form of sexual violence in the definition.

The 172<sup>nd</sup> report of the Law Commission in March 2000 put forth recommendations for a review of the rape laws which were made in partial consultation with Sakshi, Interventions for Support, Healing and Awareness (IFSHA), and the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) from Delhi. The Bill now in circulation, although referred to as the ‘AIDWA Bill’, is an outcome of this decade-long process in which several women’s groups have been involved at some stage. The Bill seeks to amend several laws in the Indian Penal Code related to sexual assault Section 375 and 376 (rape) 354 and 509 (sexual harassment or ‘outraging the modesty of a woman’), relevant sections of the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973 and the Indian

HOPEFULLY, IT WILL NOT TAKE ANOTHER 20 YEARS TO OVERHAUL THE LAWS RELATED TO RAPE. WOMEN’S GROUPS, FROM THE EARLY 1990s, HAVE MADE ATTEMPTS TO BROADEN THE CURRENT DEFINITION OF RAPE AS ‘PENETRATION OF THE VAGINA BY THE PENIS’ TO ‘SEXUAL ASSAULT’, WHICH INCLUDES OTHER FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE THAT CAN BE AS TRAUMATIC.

Evidence Act, 1872, in order to broaden the definition of rape, amend procedures and deal more effectively with child sexual abuse.

While the current Bill is not gender neutral, it is worth revisiting the debate in the context of amending laws relating to sexual assault.

**Gender Neutrality: Has the Time Arrived?**

While there has always been a consensus on broadening the definition of rape to include forms of sexual assault other than peno-vaginal penetration, the issue of gender neutrality has been a contentious one. At some point in the process, the draft law was envisaged as gender neutral, in order to bring child sexual assault, and sexual assault of men by other men, and sexual assault of women

by other women, especially in custodial situations, into the ambit of the law. One definition proposed (replacing ‘man’ and ‘woman’ with ‘person’) would apply to forced oral, anal and/or vaginal penetration by a man or a woman, forced penetrative sexual intercourse by an adult man or woman on a child of either sex and forced sexual activity between members of the same sex.

The need to make the law on sexual assault gender neutral was felt because legislation did not recognize any form of sexual assault that did not fit the parameters stated in the current Section 375 IPC i.e man as perpetrator/woman as victim; peno-vaginal penetration. Simultaneously, there was also a move to repeal Section 377 of the IPC (pertaining to ‘unnatural’ sexual acts) currently the only law that can cover sexual assault on boys and men. The fact that Sec 377 was routinely used by the police to harass consenting adult homosexual men (and in rare cases women), and not to

prosecute perpetrators of rape, made it all the more urgent to get the archaic law dropped from the statute books.

Women’s groups recognized that:

- The current definition of ‘rape’ does not cover sexual assault of boys.
- Men, too, can be sexually assaulted – by men, as well as by women (in rare cases).
- Women, too, are capable of perpetrating sexual assault on men in the broadened definition of sexual assault, and also on other women.

Women’s groups also recognized that the incidence of these forms of sexual assault is higher in custodial situations (jails/hospitals/mental asylums etc) or situations of caste/communal violence etc, where women may collude with, or initiate sexual assault on men and even women of ‘lower’ castes/minority communities. But given the current socio-legal climate, women’s groups also asserted that it would be more appropriate not to have a law covering cases of sexual assault brought by men against women (except sexual abuse of the male child).

Heated debates about the wisdom of allowing room for men to prosecute women in a patriarchal society, led to the formulation of a proviso/exception, whereby the definition would not allow a man to complain that a woman has committed sexual assault on him.

The challenge is not to avoid putting it into a legal framework because in the majority of cases women are the ones subjected to sexual assault, but to frame the law in a manner that would cover even the unlikely cases without creating more problems for

women. In several instances of laws where women can be indicted – for instance Section 498A IPC (dealing with domestic violence) or the PNDT Act (dealing with prenatal sex determination), it comes as no surprise that it is the mothers- and sisters-in law who languish in jail, rather than husbands, fathers- or brothers-in-law of the complainant wives; and that it is the women who undergo sex determination tests who are arrested, rather than the errant doctors and technicians who bribe or bail their way out of criminal charges.

In an ideal society, gender neutrality in laws on sexual violence would imply that any perpetrator of sexual violence must be punished. However, just as there can never be equality between unequals, which frames the logic of affirmative action/reservation, the concept of gender neutrality assumes that all the actors are on the same footing, and treats them all as ‘equal before law’. This can have disastrous consequences in a society where patriarchy is not only strong in social, family and community structures, but in the law enforcement and judicial structure as well. While striving for an ideal society, there must be a recognition that present society is far from ideal and egalitarian.

JUST AS THERE CAN NEVER BE EQUALITY BETWEEN UNEQUALS, WHICH FRAMES THE LOGIC OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION/RESERVATION, THE CONCEPT OF GENDER NEUTRALITY ASSUMES THAT ALL THE ACTORS ARE ON THE SAME FOOTING, AND TREATS THEM ALL AS ‘EQUAL BEFORE LAW’.

This is hardly to suggest that women who commit acts of sexual assault should not be punished, but a reminder of the reality that it is almost exclusively men who are the perpetrators of sexual crimes, and a law has necessarily to take this into account. Legal reform inevitably is forward thinking, and society is perforce expected to catch up. But in the process of catching up, we must prevent more powerless sections of society from plummeting into legal potholes.

Violence as an expression of power is not limited to unequal gender relations. It spans a whole range of



iniquitous relations – from age, caste, religion, race and sexual orientation, to situations of custody, and so on. The thesis that women are ‘inherently’ peace loving and non-violent cannot be supported by the empirical evidence of the horrors that some women, especially those in positions of power, are capable of inflicting on other human beings. Yet, a law stripped of the recognition of the systemic patriarchy in Indian society and the widespread violence *on* women, cannot be an answer to addressing the issue of violence *by* women.

**Laws on Child Sexual Abuse : Is Gender Neutrality the Answer?**

Current laws do not deal effectively with child sexual abuse either in definition, or procedural matters. Beginning from the confusion about the age till when a person is a ‘child’, to restrictive definitions of rape that do not take cognizance of the gamut of sexual violence that a child can be subjected to, to procedural inadequacies that do not take account of the vulnerability of children, their inability to articulate and give evidence, and the long term consequences of sexual abuse.

Introducing gender neutrality in the laws relating to sexual abuse could ensure that boys who were sexually abused by older boys or men could have recourse to legal protection. It would also recognise that women, too, are capable of sexually abusing children – both boys and girls.

The challenge for us then is not to criminalize consensual sexual activity of teenagers, but define ‘consent’ and ‘coercion’ in a way that would ensure protection against forced sexual acts. The proposal for safeguards like a maximum age difference between the girls and boy may end up mired in technicalities, and may sometimes be unrealistic e.g. Can it be presumed that a 15 year-old girl cannot have consensual sexual relations with a 22 year-old boy?

While the law cannot have the answer to all the complexities of sexuality, violence and gender relations, the guiding principle must be that it does not foreclose options by its very definitions. Cries for ‘strengthening’ laws and awarding more stringent punishment must not have the effect of narrowly circumscribing possible fluidity in equations based on gender and age.

**Gender Neutrality and Same Sex Violence**

Another argument in favor of a gender neutral law is the need to tackle violence of men on men and women on women, in the framework of same sex relationships. The LGBT community has argued that because the context and realities of same sex interactions are different, it would be preferable to draft a separate law dealing with same sex sexual assault. Most importantly, the initiative needs to come from the LGBT community, particularly because of the non-recognition of same sex relationships in civil law

INTRODUCING GENDER NEUTRALITY IN LAWS RELATING TO SEXUAL ABUSE COULD ENSURE THAT BOYS WHO WERE SEXUALLY ABUSED BY OLDER BOYS OR MEN COULD HAVE RECOURSE TO LEGAL PROTECTION. IT WOULD ALSO RECOGNISE THAT WOMEN, TOO, ARE CAPABLE OF SEXUALLY ABUSING CHILDREN – BOTH BOYS AND GIRLS.

THE CHALLENGE FOR US THEN IS NOT TO CRIMINALIZE CONSENSUAL SEXUAL ACTIVITY OF TEENAGERS, BUT DEFINE ‘CONSENT’ AND ‘COERCION’ IN A WAY THAT WOULD ENSURE PROTECTION AGAINST FORCED SEXUAL ACTS.

be it marriage, inheritance, or custody of children. When same sex relationships continue to be shorn of legitimacy (and in fact actively criminalised), the first legal recognition in the context of sexual violence is bound to reinforce the perception of same sex relations as ‘abnormal’.

Any legislation that specifically seeks to address same sex violence, must be grounded in the reality of same sex relations in India – the invisibility, lack of societal and legal recognition, as well as the hostility, homophobia and outright violence that is meted out to those daring to challenge the norm of heterosexual monogamous marriage. Just as laws attempting to address violence on women, however problematic they may be, do in fact, take into account some of the realities of the Indian context. For instance, the provision that it will be considered rape if the ‘man knows that he is not the husband of such complainant and that the complainant’s consent is given because the complainant believes that the offender is another man to whom the complainant is or believes herself to be lawfully married’ is peculiar to the Indian context, where the husband and wife may not even have met each other (or looked closely at each other) before the wedding ceremony. Procedural requirements also take into account the peculiarities of the marriage and family relations in Indian society.

Yet, the repeal of Section 377, cannot be conditional on the formulation of a law penalizing same sex violence. There is an urgent need to strengthen the campaign demanding the deletion of Sec 377 and emphasise that law cannot punish consensual sexual activity between two persons.

WHILE LAW CANNOT HAVE THE ANSWER TO ALL THE COMPLEXITIES OF SEXUALITY, VIOLENCE AND GENDER RELATIONS, THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE MUST BE THAT IT DOES NOT FORECLOSE OPTIONS BY ITS VERY DEFINITIONS. CRIES FOR ‘STRENGTHENING’ LAWS AND AWARDING MORE STRINGENT PUNISHMENT MUST NOT HAVE THE EFFECT OF NARROWLY CIRCUMSCRIBING POSSIBLE FLUIDITY IN EQUATIONS BASED ON GENDER AND AGE.

Simultaneously, then, there needs to be some protection for sexual assault. This should include all kinds of rape of women that don’t meet the traditional definition of peno-vaginal penetration, and, sexual assault of men by other men, as well as by women on other women, in situations we know are common, in custody, for instance. This could perhaps be taken care of by certain sections being made gender neutral, rather than make the entire law gender neutral.

What needs to be emphasized, cutting across all those vulnerable to sexual assault, is that consent should mean the unequivocal voluntary agreement to engage in the sexual activity in question.

**Laxmi Murthy** is a member of Saheli, Delhi, an autonomous women’s group set up in 1981.



# Age of Consent

NOT ONLY DOES THE AGE OF CONSENT SOMETIMES VARY FOR MEN AND WOMEN IN THE SAME COUNTRY, BUT IT ALSO MIGHT DIFFER DEPENDING ON ONE'S SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR PREFERENCE. IN OTHER WORDS, THERE IS A DIFFERENCE IN THE AGE OF CONSENT FOR HETEROSEXUAL AND HOMOSEXUAL SEX IN MANY COUNTRIES.

THIS IS DISCRIMINATORY.

Age of consent refers to the legal age at which a person is considered capable of giving informed consent to sexual acts with another person. There is a great deal of difference between age of consent, marriageable age, the age of majority and the age of criminal responsibility.

The age of consent varies in different countries, falling anywhere within the range of 14 to 18 years although it can be much lower than that, especially for women in Middle Eastern countries. Setting a bar on the age of consent implies that somebody engaging in sexual activity with a person below the age of consent, commits child sexual abuse, which is punishable as a crime.

Although the widespread assumption is that of sexual relations contained within marriage, the age of consent and age of marriage often differ amongst countries and even within the same country. Often the age of consent is much higher than the age at which people marry.

Not only does the age of consent sometimes vary for men and women in the same country, but it also might differ depending on one's sexual orientation or preference. In other words, there is a difference in the age of consent for heterosexual and homosexual sex in many countries.

An example of this disparity has recently been highlighted in Hong Kong where the age of consent for heterosexuals to engage in sexual activity is 16 years; whilst the age for homosexuals is 21 years. Though sexual relationships amongst gay men was legalized in 1991, Hong Kong's laws regulating sexual relations between gay men still discriminate against gay men and violate international agreements such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. For instance, Sections 118 and 124 of the Crimes Ordinance of Hong Kong, stipulate different ages of consent for homosexual and heterosexual sexual relations, as well as different degrees of punishment.

According to Hong Kong law the age of consent for heterosexual intercourse is 16 years. Men who engage in sex with women under the age of 16 are liable to imprisonment for up to five years. The age of consent for male homosexuals however is 21 years, five years more than for heterosexuals. This is discriminatory, suggesting that young male homosexuals over the age of 16 years are less capable of making decisions than their heterosexual peers.

Moreover, the discrepancies lie not just in terms of the gender of the partner involved but also in terms of the punishment meted out for the same so-called 'criminal

activity'. Whilst men who engage in a sexual relationship with women under the age of 16 years are liable to imprisonment for up to five years, gay men are liable to life imprisonment if they were to have sex with other men below the age of 21 years.

This is not only discriminatory, but also raises other important public policy concerns. Because it is illegal to engage in homosexual sex before the age of 21, educators also face prosecution if they educate young gay men about safe sex.

Currently there is no separate law in Hong Kong about the age of consent for lesbian sex. The law does not address lesbians in any express provisions because of a historical colonial denial of their existence. This leaves young lesbians outside of the protection accorded to other young people by proper age of consent laws.

The Hong Kong government denies any kind of discrimination using the rationale that the law also prohibits any act of anal sex involving a woman below the age of 21 years and thus there is no difference in the laws for heterosexuals and homosexuals. This rationale fails however to acknowledge that anal sex is the only form of sexual intercourse open to gay men.

The discriminatory basis for the present legislation is further revealed by the fact that amongst homosexual couples, when one (or both) partners in a gay relationship is below the age of 21 years, both partners are liable to conviction and imprisonment including the partner who is below the age of 21 years. This does not arise in the case of anal sex amongst heterosexual couples where the woman is below 21 years. She is not liable to prosecution. Again, among heterosexual couples, in the case of a man below the age of 21 years having sex with a woman above the age of 21 years, neither of the partners is held liable.

The logic accorded by the government and the administration behind making the act punishable for even the partners (men) who are below the age of 21 years in a consensual homosexual relationship is that those gay men

will be deterred from blackmailing their older partners by disclosing their relationship. However, in a submission to the Legislative Council, Subcommittee on Discrimination on the Grounds of Sexual Orientation, the Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has offered a list of reasons why such logic is flawed, including the fact that there is no evidence to support the notion that gay men under 21 are likely to blackmail their partners. If the goal is to protect older men from blackmail, why not make blackmail laws more stringent and why not make a female partner liable to prosecution for the same reasons?

The gay rights movement across the world has been campaigning to establish equal age of consent regardless of the gender of one's partner and this has led to many countries adopting an equal age of consent for gays and heterosexuals alike, sometimes amidst protest by self-appointed moral guardians of society.

In 2005, a young gay man in Hong Kong, William Leung, mounted a challenge to the laws which criminalise consensual sex between men aged over 16 years but under 21 years whilst allowing sex between consenting heterosexuals aged 16 and over. He won the first round, in the High Court but the government has filed an appeal and the case is due for hearing on July 6 and 7, 2006. This however is not just a case about gay rights or the right to have sex. It is about people's fundamental rights to equality and privacy. The Basic Law in Hong Kong which is the territory's mini constitution, states that all residents of Hong Kong shall be treated equally before the law and are entitled to protection under the law without any discrimination.

Activists in Hong Kong and around the world are awaiting the Court of Appeal's decision with interest to determine the current state of the Rule of Law in Hong Kong and are calling upon the Hong Kong government to adhere to its domestic constitution as well as its international treaty obligations.

Reading  
Beautiful Boxer

YUEN-MEI WONG



*Beautiful Boxer*<sup>1</sup> is adopted from a true life story of Parinya Charoenphol and told through the personal narrative of its main protagonist, Nong Toom. The film appears to be an autobiography that implies a transparent account of Parinya’s personal history. However, my reading does not intend to deal with the question of transparency, rather to foreground the film’s textuality and its representation.

Often, the question of selfhood and identity in an autobiographical film is assumed to be narrated with a coherent and unitary closure. Instead of presenting Nong Toom’s personal journey of self realization and subject/identity formation in a successive linear model, this film rather delicately demonstrated the dynamic and dialogic encounters between the evolving self and the situated societal discourses and ideologies. For Nong Toom, recognizing the self is, from the start, fraught with uncertainty and prohibition.

Bodies as Gender Markers

In many ways language orders and deflects body experience. Our passions, desires and behaviours – indeed our sense of self – assume meaning within historically specific discourses and ideologies. In recounting Nong Toom’s desires for a sex/body-transformation, his personal narrative began



with his childhood experience. This is set against a backdrop of poor rural lives and familial relationship. He selectively highlighted his first self-identification with the tenderness and beauty embodied by the female *Likay* dancer (Thai folk opera) and his dislike against the aggression and violence demonstrated in the male-oriented *Muay Thai* (Thai kickboxing).

However, Nong Toom’s response to these gendered body expressions later became his major source of tension and contestation. The *Likay* and *Muay Thai* identities not only endowed him with sex/body meanings, but also engaged him in the binary gendered web of metaphors. Being born with a male body, the prevailing binary gender categories are limited and thus limiting his choices of body appearance, behaviours, experience and indeed self-identity. Obviously, Nong Toom’s fancy for self-decoration and beauty had challenged the social cultural system of sex/body and gender.

The predominant gender discourses and ideologies rendered the body as the site of demarcations, with the expectation that the visible appearance of sex/body ‘naturally’ led to a corresponding gender. This had hindered Nong Toom from acquiring a transgressive body without resorting to re-negotiating his/her maleness and male

identity. Therefore, s/he had to endure years of torment dealing with these reified binary gender identities. Further more, s/he had to battle with the disciplinary and punitive power of the hegemonic gender system in striving for a space to live his/her sex/body experience.

Kathoe as a Space for Slippage

Growing up in Thai culture wherein the Buddhist system of belief prevails, Nong Toom eventually encountered a space for slippage in the discourses of *Kathoe*<sup>2</sup>. Apprehending *Kathoe* identity in Thai culture would possibly generate a better understanding of Nong Toom’s subjectivity, his/her psyche and his/her self<sup>3</sup>. The culturally rooted discourse of *Kathoe* for an indeterminate gender enabled Nong Toom to acquire a sex/gender identity beyond the binary gender system although not without anxieties and contestation.

In the film, there were conflicting discourses of *Kathoe*. The predominant religious institutions prohibited *Kathoe* practices and regarded it as sinful or a misdeed that will cause suffering. Nonetheless, there was a marginal discourse in the *Kathoe* tradition<sup>4</sup> that was tolerant towards or accepting of the *Kathoes*’ existence. Indeed, Nong Toom discovered the gaps for growth among the competing discourses of *Kathoe* and *karma* (suffering). Eventually,





identifying him/herself as a *Kathoey* allowed him/her to claim the marginal discourse to make sense of his/her own subjectivity. It especially helped to justify Nong Toom's personal agenda in becoming a successful *Muay Thai* boxer.

### Subverting the Gendered *Muay Thai*

The sex/body is not only a text of culture but also is a direct locus of social control. Motivated by his/her deliberation to improve the economic condition of his/her parents Nong Toom joined the male-oriented *Muay Thai* and consequently, had to immerse him/herself in the male/masculine social space. This prompts us to wonder how s/he as a self-identified *Kathoey* in hiding would survive within the assumed normative male territory.

Ironically, it was *Muay Thai*'s aesthetic value and not its maleness that had drawn Nong Toom closer to the ring. His/her mastery of *Muay Thai* is not an attempt to achieve normative masculinity or male status but to perform a bodily art as his/her passage to difference. His/her enormous victories in the masculine ring enabled him/her to claim a metaphorical space for an exhibition of a *Kathoey* through the feminine *Likay* body performance. Nong Toom has indeed opened up new opportunity for marginalized gender subjects to move between different gendered spaces within normative male power networks. The *Muay Thai* ring

temporarily became the nexus of transgressive gender imaginings of bodies, rendering the normative gender subjects at times to be suspended, re-invented and/ or subverted.

In other words, the *Muay Thai* ring was not merely a site available for the deployment of male-oriented disciplining practices but also a symbolic realm for the invention and perpetration of identities and subjectivities. Nevertheless, due to the astonishing and also exasperating publicity surrounding Nong Toom's *Kathoey* identity coupled with the increasing visibility of his/her transforming male/female body, s/he was ostracised by the *Muay Thai* committee. Undoubtedly Nong Toom's individuality had not only transgressed the boundaries of normative genders but relentlessly exposed the vulnerability, instability of maleness and fear of the normative male subjects who felt threatened by this transgression.

### Self as an Unfinished Project?

In *Beautiful Boxer*, appearance and body, but not personality symbolize gender change. The body, whether consciously or unconsciously, undergoes deliberate transformation within various situated cultural habitus. Although changes, fluidity and diversity are embedded in culture, nonetheless, when one's body modifications divert, or transgress the prevailing



dominant cultural logics, so many anxieties and contestations appear. Likewise, when its effects correspond with the predominant norms, the underlying social processes are often overlooked and hence are regarded as natural. Nong Toom experienced such irony when s/he exercised self-agency to strive for a desired sex/body-modification that somehow challenged the essentialist binary gender system. Conversely, when Nong Toom received intense training to be moulded, shaped and developed into a *Muay Thai* body, nobody doubted or questioned such a body modification process.

Ultimately, the film argued that gender is a contested concept, and that gender identities are unstable categories which are only loosely and contingently related to sex/body. In retrospect, Nong Toom viewed the past not as fixed and finished, but as so vitally connected to the present as interweaving and intersecting with continuity and disjuncture. The film illustrated delicately the interweaving of the past and the present, of the discursive identity and the material body, and, of alienation and transformation. However, because the film ended with Nong Toom settled him/herself in a 'woman's body' and identity, this impels us to further contemplate whether this would be considered conforming to or reinforcing the dominant cultural logics, whether transgression is only transitory and would not be able to affect or create an alternative order.

1. The film *Beautiful Boxer* was directed and produced by Ekachai Uekrongtham. It was first released in 2003 and received several international awards in the following years, including The Grand Prix 2004 Award in the 31<sup>st</sup> Brussels International Film Festival and the Silver Peacock Award in the 2004 International Festival of India. For further information visit [www.beautifulboxer.com](http://www.beautifulboxer.com).

2. In the film, the term transvestite is used in the English subtitles for *Kathoey*. A transvestite is a sexual category classified by modern science to refer to a person, often a man who cross-dresses for sexual pleasure; this term is inadequate to capture the nuanced meaning ascribed to *Kathoey* in Thai culture.

3. *Kathoey* means an indeterminate gender or a combination of masculine and feminine gender that can be found in plants, animals or human beings. The inclusive nature of *Kathoey* embraces various types of non-heteronormative sex/gender identities including intersex, transvestite, transgender, transsexual or even gay people (Refer to Sinnott, Megan J. Toms and Dees: *Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004, p.5)

4. Within Buddhist paradigms of karmic retribution, *Kathoey* are believed to be predestined from birth as a result of karmic debt in a former life. Being a *Kathoey* would not further any karmic consequences from desires or actions arising out of the state of being a *Kathoey*. It is even possible for *Kathoey* to achieve *nibbana* (salvation) in this life if they conscientiously apply themselves to prescribed Buddhist principles for attaining spiritual liberation. (Refer to Totman, Richard. *The Third Sex: Kathoey – Thailand's Ladyboys*. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2003, p. 68)

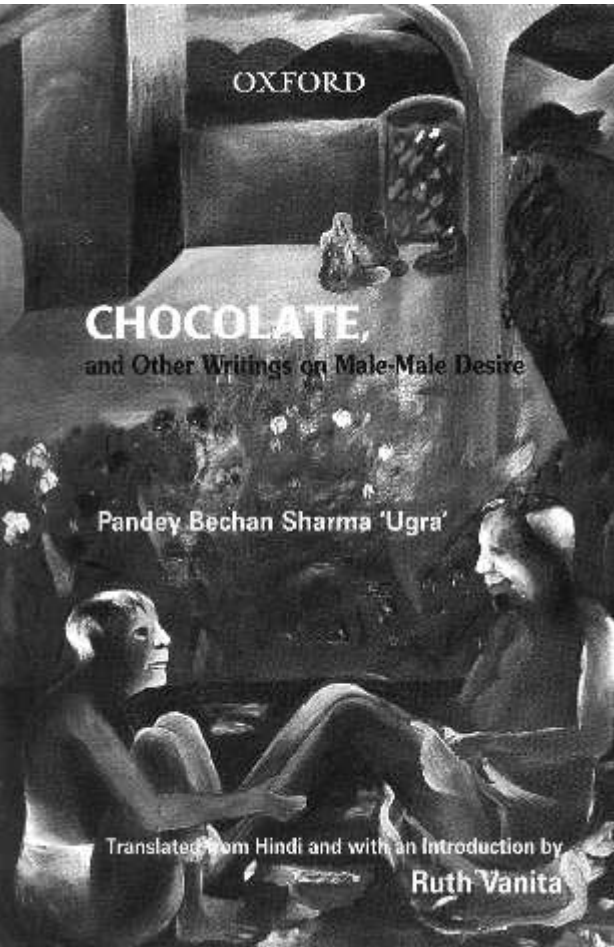
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Review of  
Chocolate and Other Writings on Male-Male Desire

Pandey Bechan Sharma ‘Ugra’  
Translated and with an Introduction by Ruth Vanita.  
Oxford. 2006.

GAUTAM BHAN



In 1927, Pandey Bechan Sharma (1900-1960; his pen name, which I shall use to refer to him, was Ugra, literally the Hindi word for extreme) wrote a series of short stories in Hindi called *Chocolate*. The stories were unambiguous in their depictions of male-male desire – euphemized by the term chocolate – and, on their release were so immensely popular (Vanita describes ‘lines stretching out from book stores in Calcutta’) that a second edition was printed within weeks. That stories on male-male desire sold so widely and publicly is perhaps explained by the fact that Ugra, a known nationalist and Gandhian, claimed that he wrote them simply to ‘expose and eradicate homosexuality’ (p 4). In each of the stories, therefore, the intent was to condemn the protagonists for their same-sex desire. Despite this explicit declaration, however, a national debate erupted on the issue. Ugra’s detractors claimed that his fiction ‘attracted readers to the vice rather than repulsing them’, arguing that speaking of homosexuality – even to condemn it – gave the issue an importance and a presence that was dangerous and immoral.

Almost eighty years later, one has to ask: can words written explicitly to condemn same-sex desire constitute a history worth claiming? In the context of contemporary India, where non-heterosexualities (and, indeed, non-normative heterosexualities) are so pervasively silenced, and where

homophobic readings of texts (let alone texts that offer and seemingly endorse such readings) do we want stories that demonize same-sex desire to re-emerge? Would the reactions be any different? In translating *Chocolate* from Hindi, Ruth Vanita argues that to see Ugra’s stories simply as denouncements of male same-sex desire misses the importance of their temporal, cultural, and social location, and overlooks the fact that we perhaps have much to learn from a text that sparked what was probably one of the first modern debates about homosexuality in India and one of the rare ones in the Hindi press.

How are we to understand the impact of Ugra’s work today? How are we to receive the text as readers located in a context that both resembles and differs significantly from that in which the stories were set? Vanita argues that ‘writing the history of homophobia is as important as writing the history of same-sex relationships’, (p 1) for it enables us to understand not only how those that attack homosexuality do so, but also allows us to find language and ideas that can effectively counter these assertions. The complexity of Ugra’s stories, therefore, is that they often contained homophobic and moral messages, but also were replete with possibilities of countering these very messages.

Take Ugra’s depictions of male-male desire. At a time when homosexuals were barely even acknowledged and simply not spoken about, Ugra’s stories created character after character who spoke of his desire for boys and other men. In his writing, as Vanita argues, there emerged a picture, however distorted, of ‘the urban Indian homosexual and

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bisexual men’s social life and language in the early twentieth century, and even of their self-view and self-defense.’ (p 5) As she states, ‘except for one story set in jail, none of Ugra’s protagonists belong to the underworld. They are respectable members of society – teachers, college students, writers, who carry on their affairs both in public and in private. Nor is their homosexuality pre marital and thus explicable by a lack of options. Many of them are even married.’

None of the characters in the stories ever think of themselves to be diseased or immoral. In fact, many offer arguments in the defense of their desire, which are also, on occasion, accepted by their friends and other characters in the story. So in *Kept Boy*, Mahashayji defends his attraction to a boy by saying to his friend, ‘the world cannot run only according to your own thinking. Truth must be respected wherever it is. Beauty alone is truth. So whether the

beauty is a woman’s or a man’s, I am a slave to love.’ Many of the protagonists in the other stories offer similar arguments and, more importantly, create a certain language that same-sex desiring men and those not disposed against such desire, could use in order to counter homophobia. The argument has echoes of all the same slogans that one would hear at a contemporary queer rights event: that there is not one ‘truth’ or type of desire, and that no one desire has the right to stake its claim as being ‘better’ than any other.

Vanita points out in her excellent introduction that, for all his claims to denounce homosexuality, Ugra chose to call the book *Chocolate* (it was called *choklat* in the original

Hindi as well, using a common Hindi transliteration of the English word widely understood even by those who only speak Hindi), a reference to, as one of the characters explains, ‘those innocent, tender, and beautiful boys of the country, whom society’s demons push into the mouth of ruin to quench their own thirsts.’ (p. 14) Yet amidst this clearly acerbic and moralistic definition, Vanita argues that chocolate also refers to an object that was, and is, desired almost universally across India. By calling it chocolate, Ugra almost negates his own denunciations of homosexuality by indirectly acknowledging the natural inclination to, well, have some. More than a semantic difference, this is an important aspect of the stories. Putting aside the moralistic end that always condemns male-male desire in each of the stories, the natural inclination to desire boys is not debated in the stories. Restraint is advised, loss of reputation and status are threatened, and consequences are extreme, but the fact that the desire should exist at all is rarely, if at all, questioned by Ugra. In fact, in their own way, the texts implicitly acknowledge the near universal presence of such desire . . .

Vanita guards against simplistic readings of the text with a detailed introduction that complicates and contextualizes Ugra’s writings, and also lets the reader know about the debates surrounding the texts that argue not just about sexuality, but about caste, religion, nationalism, and morality. Her introduction balances the actual texts of Ugra’s stories at the end, and carefully, though thankfully not pedantically, it addresses each of the possibly simplistic

desires in the stories, could see others like them, and were able to overcome the inevitable gruesome and moral-reinforcing end. As readers, perhaps in empathy for those readers, we should make the effort to read beyond Ugra’s words as well, and reclaim and subvert the language of homophobia from within.

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and negative readings that the text could have been subjected to given the current conservative and homophobic climate in India. She points out, importantly, for example, that though the word ‘boy’ is used often in the text, and boys of age twelve and thirteen are the objects of desire, it is important to remember that these stories were written at a time when the debate in Indian politics was whether to keep the age of consent for girls to eight or ten, and that seeing Ugra’s writing as being about child abuse (as some have done) is a simplistic and incorrect gauge of the author’s intention.

She also reminds us that history never teaches us just one lesson, and that fiction can never have merely one meaning. At a time when same-sex desire could only be written and read between the lines, perhaps queer readers of *Chocolate* found echoes of their own lives and

## BDSM

S&M is a popular term for a range of activities that fall under the category of BDSM. **BDSM** stands for **BONDAGE AND DISCIPLINE (B&D)**, **DOMINANCE AND SUBMISSION (D&S)** and **SADO-MASOCHISM (S&M)**. The term is used for any consensual activities that adults engage in that involve the exchange of sexual power. It may involve enhanced sensations, erotic games or role playing, or more extreme sensations of pain.

Many people mistakenly believe that BDSM is abusive and that only sick, cruel or ‘perverted’ people engage in it. The fact is that BDSM is not abusive because it is based on **CONSENT**. Also, it requires a very high degree of trust and sexual intimacy between partners. The partners in a BDSM scenario typically agree on the nature and range of what they will and will not do, decide on a ‘safe word’ to indicate when they want to stop a particular activity, and commit to pleasuring each other. What about this is sick, cruel or ‘perverted’? In fact, many people who condemn BDSM are themselves unknowingly engaging in milder forms of it if they run ice cubes along their partner’s body, rub silk or a feather duster on their skin, use blindfolds during sex, and so on.

Let’s look at each of the terms now. **BONDAGE** refers to the practice of either tying a person’s limbs with silk scarves or handcuffs or ropes or by tying them to an object such as a bed. **DISCIPLINE** uses rules and ‘punishments’ to control the partner’s behaviour. These can take the form of sexual acts or even everyday household chores. Remember, that the rules are set beforehand by both partners consenting to them.

THOUGH MUCH-MALIGNED, S&M IS ACTUALLY BASED ON MUTUAL CONSENT AND TRUST. IT IS ONE OF THE MANY DIVERSE WAYS IN WHICH PEOPLE EXPRESS THEIR FANTASIES AND SEXUALITY.

**DOMINANCE** and **SUBMISSION** relate to the giving and acceptance of dominance of one person over the other. The one doing the giving here is the Dominant or **DOM** and the receiver is the Submissive or **SUB**. Dominance and Submission do not necessarily involve any physical contact and frequently are the enactments of fantasy scenarios such as a Mistress-Slave relationship. Doms and Subs can be of either gender. Female doms are also called Dommes, and a woman who does this for money is called a Dominatrix or Prodomme. A prodomme is not a prostitute; she provides domination services, not sexual ones, through dealing with clients’ fetishes and fantasies. The situation does not have to be sexual, but the enjoyment of it is. Interestingly, many more men than women like to play the role of a Sub.

**SADOMASOCHISM**, commonly known as **S&M**, **S/M** or **SM**, refers to being sexually aroused or gratified by inflicting (sadism) or receiving (masochism) pain. Pain here is not just any type of pain, but enhanced sensations in a sexual context. So, a masochist might enjoy pain during sex but not like it all if he accidentally bangs his elbow on a table edge. Similarly, sadists are not ‘cruel people who like torturing others’; they are in fact keenly attuned to their partner’s desires, responses and pleasure. Tickling, scratching, biting also include elements of S&M. In slang, sadists are **TOPS** and masochists are **BOTTOMS**.

BDSM practitioners may prefer to adopt a particular role (that of Top or Bottom, or Dom or Sub) or may prefer to switch between roles. BDSM is practised by men, women, transgender, transsexual, heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual people. It is one of the many diverse ways in which people express their fantasies and sexuality.

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

## NANDINI GHOSH

I think that the affirmation and violation of one's sexual rights while being very personal, are at the same time, completely social, deeply rooted within what a particular culture considers to be acceptable or within the permissible bounds of sexual activities.

For most Asian women sexuality can only be acceptable if expressed within a conjugal relationship. Any other expression of women's sexuality, though pleasurable for the man, is denied to 'good' women, those who are daughters, wives and mothers of the men who make the rules in society. In societies where marriages are arranged, women who 'deviate' from the norm are considered as asexual, and undesirable as marriage partners but ironically still remain objects of sexual gratification for men.

In a society which places premium on certain valued characteristics, like height, fairness of complexion, gracefulness, culinary capabilities and various other criteria, I am an anomaly. Along with being dark (by Indian standards), I am also very short. There may be some medical condition, which aptly describes me, but I do not know what it is and nor do I wish to. That's because in my family I am who I am and have always been treated as an equal member of the family. All my relatives have always been very fond of me. However, now at a later age, I wonder if all that love wasn't a form of pity for someone they always expected to be denied the tag of 'woman'. They refer to me as my 'parents' son', as if being a daughter I cannot really be the strong and independent woman I was reared to be. People in public spaces are crueler and deem it impossible for a girl like me to have any sexual inclinations – 'Who would ever think of marrying her?' – a comment I have heard many times and still cringe in disgust every time I hear it.

All my life, I have consciously sought to avoid negative connotations that society loves to attach to people like me. I shudder every time I hear words like 'dwarf' or 'disabled' used to describe me because as a person rooted in a particular socio-cultural milieu, I also associate negative connotations to these words, which do nothing to affirm my self-image. Yet, although on a conscious level I refuse to accept a devalued image of myself, I realise that society, and even my relatives consider me 'unmarriageable'. I have internalised many of the messages sent by the cultural community I belong to, where parents start scouting for a prospective groom the moment a girl reaches adulthood. But the fact that I am in my mid thirties and still no one, except my parents, is in the slightest bit concerned about my marriage is something which makes me pause and think. Even my younger female cousins are being married off – at their marriages I hear of proposals being sent for other younger girls, but till now none for me. In a society where sexuality is accepted only within marriage, doesn't that set me apart in a way that denies my sexuality right to its core?

The worst situations that again negate my sexuality, instead of affirming it, is when men in public spaces have a good time feeling me up – to check out whether, despite being a short person, I have the 'essentials'. Of course, I do have the essentials – that is what gives me my idea of me, my self, my identity as a woman.

**Nandini Ghosh** is a women's rights and disability rights activist. She has worked for six years in disability related NGOs in West Bengal and Jharkhand. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai.

## AT THE RESOURCE CENTRE

**JOIN** the 'Sexual Concerns – Approaches and Management' E-Discussion Forum!

The Resource Centre conducts structured, time-bound, moderated e-discussion forums on various topics related to sexuality throughout the year. The first discussion forum was titled 'Sexual Pleasure, Sexuality, and Rights' and ran from October 17 to December 27, 2005. The second discussion was titled, 'Sexuality and Censorship' and was from January 16, 2006 to March 23, 2006. The third discussion titled 'Sexuality, Young People and Rights' ran from April 3, 2006 to June 6, 2006. (Archives can be viewed on the website at [www.asiasrc.org/forum.php](http://www.asiasrc.org/forum.php)).

The fourth discussion titled 'Sexual Concerns – Approaches and Management' began on June 12, 2006 and will continue till August 7, 2006.

In the South and Southeast Asia region, we know that sexuality is by and large a contentious subject. Sexuality is constructed as 'dangerous' or 'dirty'. We therefore grow up getting more and more confused and mystified about sexuality. What are the myths and misconceptions related to sexuality in specific country contexts? Do these in any way contribute to what later might manifest as sexual problems?

Talking of problems, each of us has had certain sexual concerns or we are familiar with them through the lives of friends, relatives or people we know. What are these specific concerns about sexuality that people most commonly have? When does a concern become a problem? What do people



perceive as a 'sexual problem'? What are the common approaches used to understand and address sexual problems? For instance, is it based on a biomedical model or one that looks at problems in a relational context? Are sexual concerns/problems different in the different countries of our region? For instance, in India, many young men perceive the emission of a small amount of semen in urine to be a problem even though it is not one. Is this perception shared across different countries?

Also, what do people do about their sexual concerns/problems? Do they try to address them as effectively as any other aspect that affects health and well-being? Do they go to doctors? Use indigenous methods such as herbal lotions, potions and pills? Do they use therapists, helplines or internet counseling etc? What sorts of help is available in each of our countries?

These are only some of the questions and debates we will be considering in the ongoing forum discussion. We hope to engage a diverse range of people and ideas on this issue. To join the forum and view the discussion, please visit our website and follow the instructions after clicking on the link to E-Forum Discussions. We look forward to your participation in an exciting and lively dialogue!

**READ** *In Plainspeak* Online

Every publication of *In Plainspeak* is available to download in PDF format on the South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality website [www.asiasrc.org](http://www.asiasrc.org). To receive a



hard copy of *In Plainspeak*, just send your mailing address to resourcecentre@tarshi.net.

BROWSE our website at www.asiasrc.org

The website contains information about Resource Centre programmes, a database of library materials, links to organizational and electronic resources throughout the region, links to journals, news articles, an online poll, and announcements.

TAKE the Online Poll

The Resource Centre website hosts online polls every two months in an effort to highlight different angles of debates on current issues. Previous statements have highlighted issues in sex work, pleasure, pornography, and HIV and sexuality. Visit the poll, post your comments, and check out what others think at www.asiasrc.org.

CONTRIBUTE to *In Plainspeak*

Calling all Artists and Writers! We hope to showcase a diverse range of images throughout the magazine in each issue. *In Plainspeak* is calling for pictures, drawings, paintings, graphics, images, and paintings related to sexuality for inclusion in the magazine. Submissions should be sent to resourcecentre@tarshi.net.

We want to hear your stories! We are inviting submissions for *The 'I' Column* for the next issue of *In Plainspeak*. This column features a personal and specific account of how individuals see sexual rights as affecting them and highlight

either affirmation or violation of those rights. If you want to share your experience, please send us a 500 word essay to resourcecentre@tarshi.net by August 30, 2006.

VISIT the Resource Centre Library

The South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality library hosts a collection of classic and contemporary books on sexuality, fiction, newsletters, CDROMs, newsletters, organisational material, electronic files, conference papers, journals and other periodicals, on sexuality, reproductive health, and rights. The library is open to use by professionals working in the field, NGOs, academics, researchers, and students.

The library page is hosted on the Resource Centre website (www.asiasrc.org). Users can access web links to many useful journals, browse the library catalogue for information on materials in the library, and send search queries to the librarian.

Library Hours: Monday to Thursday, 1:30 pm to 5:00 pm.  
Telephone: 91-11- 55642625

GIVE us Your Feedback!

What did you think of this issue of *In Plainspeak*? We welcome any comments, suggestions, or ideas for how we can make improve our work. Please send your feedback to resourcecentre@tarshi.net. We look forward to hearing from you!

ABOUT THE RESOURCE CENTRE

The South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality aims to increase knowledge and scholarship on issues of sexuality, sexual health and sexual wellbeing in this region. The Resource Centre specifically focuses on sexuality related work in China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, The Philippines, and Vietnam. The Centre serves as a space for activists, advocates, practitioners, and researchers, to better understand, examine, and expand upon the complex issues surrounding debates on sexuality.

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

TARSHI, a not-for-profit organization based in New Delhi, India, believes that all people have the right to sexual wellbeing 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.

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