



... for the rights of sexually marginalised women

## আমাদের কথা

বই মেলা ... মেলার মাঠ... মেলা মানুষ  
মেলা... মেলার মেলা... মেলাবার মেলা

বিশাল এই মেলার মাঠের জন্য আরও অনেক অনেক বইপ্রেমী মানুষের মতো আমরাও অধীর আগ্রহে অপেক্ষা করে থাকি। মাত্রতো দশটা দিন, দেখতে দেখতেই শেষ হয়ে যায়। কত বই, কত মানুষ আর আমাদের হাতে এই ‘স্বকণ্ঠে’। মেলার আর মেলাবার চাবিকাঠি আমাদের মতো করে, পাঁচ টাকায় এই মেলার মাঠে আপনিও পেতে পারেন। বেশ কয়েক পাতার ঠাসবুনোটে কিছু কথা — একটু অন্যরকম, কিছুটা না জানা, কখনও বা ভুলে যাওয়া। কারোর জন্য মনের কথা, কারোর জন্য মনের খোরাক। তবে এহ বাহ্য — এসব কথা শুধুই কথার কথা হয়ে থাকবে যদি না এটুকু বোঝাতে পেরে থাকি বা আপনি বুঝতে পেরে থাকেন যে আসলে ‘স্বকণ্ঠে’ মানে একটা ভয়ঙ্কর জেদ, ‘স্বকণ্ঠে’ মানে খোলা মন, ‘স্বকণ্ঠে’ মানে প্রশ্ন করা, ‘স্বকণ্ঠে’ মানে ঘুরে দাঁড়ানো — ‘স্বকণ্ঠে’ মানে পৃথিবীর যেকোন জায়গায় সংখ্যাগুরু চোখ রাঙানির বিরুদ্ধে চ্যালেঞ্জের সঙ্গে একাত্মতা।

‘স্বকণ্ঠে’ মানে ওরা-আমরা বিভেদটুকুকে মুছতে মুছতে এগিয়ে যাওয়া, মিলে যাওয়া।

আসলে সবার জন্যই এই মেলাটা খুব জরুরী। মিলতে না পারলে নিজের পুরোটাকে মেলে ধরা যায়না — বৃত্ত সম্পূর্ণ হয়না। ১৯৮০-তে শুরু হওয়া প্রথম জাতীয় (স্বশাসিত) নারী সম্মেলন ২৫ বছর পর সপ্তমতম সম্মেলনে মূল আলোচিত বিষয়গুলির মধ্যে স্থান দিতে বাধ্য হয়েছে যৌনতার কারণে প্রাপ্তিক নারীর বিষয়টিকে। সমকামী, উভকামী ও রূপান্তরকামী নারীর জীবন ও অধিকারের (অধিকারহীনতাই বলা ভাল) বিষয়গুলিকে ব্রাত্য করে রেখে নারী আন্দোলনও সম্পূর্ণ হয়না। অবশ্য শুধু আলোচনার স্তরেই নয় অন্যতম আয়োজক সংস্থা হিসেবেও আমাদের সদস্যরা কাঁধে কাঁধ মিলিয়ে সফল করেছে এই বিশাল কর্মযজ্ঞ, যেখানে সারা ভারত থেকে ২,৩০০ জন মহিলা এসেছিলেন।

বলছিলাম না মিলতে হয়, মেলাতে হয়।

আর যেখানে সেই চেষ্টা সফল হয়না, সেখানে আর সবার মতো না হতে পারার মাশুল দিতে হয় কখনও জীবন দিয়ে, কখনও বর্বরোচিত অত্যাচারে।

ডিসেম্বর মাসের শেষ সপ্তাহে নদীয়ার হাঁসখালিতে ঘটে যাওয়া ঘটনাটা নিশ্চয়ই আপনাদেরও চোখে পড়েছিল — ‘ছেলে ছেলে হওয়া’ অর্থাৎ প্যান্ট-শার্ট পরা আর সাইকেল চড়ার অপরাধে ১৭ বছরের মেয়েটিকে শাস্তি পেতে হয়েছিল মর্মান্তিকভাবে। সে ঘটনার বিস্তারিত বিবরণ দেওয়া নিশ্চয়ই জন। খালি এটুকু বলাই যথেষ্ট যে পুরো ঘটনাটা এতদূর নাড়া দিয়েছিল আমাদের যে আমরা পারিনি দূরে থাকতে। ছুটে গিয়েছিলাম মেয়েটির পাশে দাঁড়াতে সীমিত সাধ্য নিয়েই।

আজও আমরা তার পাশেই আছি। কিন্তু আমাদের হাজার চেষ্টা সত্ত্বেও ২২শে ডিসেম্বর দিনটাকে ওর জীবন থেকে আমরা মুছে ফেলতে পারব না, যেমন পারব না নিশা সিং আর নিশা উপাধ্যায়কে তাদের জীবন ফিরিয়ে দিতে।

দশদিন বাদে মেলা ভেঙে যাবে — কেনা বেচার পাট শেষ হবে। যার যার পসরা নিয়ে সবাই ফিরে যাবে, আমরাও ফিরব। মেলা শেষে হিসেব করার পালা, কি নিয়ে এসেছিলাম, কি নিয়ে ফিরছি। প্রতিবছর মুদ্রণসংখ্যা ছাপিয়ে যায় আগেরবারের সংখ্যাকে, বুঝতে পারি অহেতুক সমকামতীতির নিরেট দেওয়ালটাতেও খুব সূক্ষ্ম যে ফাটল দেখা দিয়েছে, সেটা স্পষ্ট হয়ে উঠছে একটু একটু করে। একটু একটু করে দানা বাঁধছে একটা সদর্থক জীবনবোধ, সবার সাথে, সবাইকে নিয়ে .....

## Am I that sex? When our lips speak gender sexuality together

Ranjita Biswas

### Affirming diversities, resisting divisiveness

The National Conference of the Autonomous Women’s Movement has over the years been a meeting place for thousands of women from different streams of life coming from diverse class, caste, ethnic, linguistic and political backgrounds. The conference provides a space of warmth and security to women who come together to share their experiences, express solidarity and learn from each other’s struggles. From 1980, when the first National Conference was held in Mumbai, to the present one held from 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> September 2006, in Kolkata, the journey has been marked by significant learnings and critical insights. One growing realization from these gatherings of different women has been that women’s oppression can no longer be understood in terms of a mono-structural cause or a mono-causal structure that exists cross-culturally and affects all women’s lives in a singular manner. Oppression has to be understood in terms of the complex imbrications of caste, economy, disability, displacement, violence, sex, gender, sexuality. This complex understanding of oppression has also been informed by a more fractured notion of ‘woman’ undercut by locations of caste, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality.

The seventh National Conference of the Autonomous Women’s Movement held for the first time in Kolkata marked a number of ‘firsts’. It was the first time that women with disability were attending the conference. It was the first time that sex workers and bar dancers participated and few trans-people made their presence felt. It is to be noted that the conference decided to keep out M to F transgender people (atleast this time, they argued) by not giving them any official platform, (some though were there by ‘invitation only’, and eligibility for invitation was assessed through their association with the women’s movement). This was also the first time a full day’s session was organized on sexuality in a national conference of the women’s movement. As one participant informed us, this was the culmination of a long and difficult journey. The first time women’s sexuality was discussed in a national conference was in 1990 in Calicut, in an evening capsule on “single women”. There was a quiet “coming out” and lesbianism was heard in hushed tones and hesitant whispers. In the next conference in Tirupathi 1994, massive convulsions were precipitated by a lesbian group’s proposal to have a separate session on the issue. In 1997 the convulsions resolved to give way to a session organized by Stree Sangam and Sangini in the Ranchi conference. The 2006 conference saw a considerable turn of tables as the two lesbian organizations, Sappho and LABIA, were successful not only in organizing a “marginalized genders and sexualities” session but were prominent co-actors in the National Coordination Committee (NCC) and visible enough to foreground the issue of lesbianism in the greater scene of the women’s movement in India.

## Lesbians and women: queer bed partners?

While this was in itself an achievement, what was disappointing is the manner in which the sex gender problematic was considered solely the concern of sexually marginalized women. While Sappho and LABIA organized the “marginalized genders and sexualities” session, in the larger conference milieu the category ‘woman’ remained unquestioned/unproblematized when it came to discussing and debating “women’s problems” in relation to the agriculture movement, caste politics, displacement-migration, violence etc.

At the session, attended only by members and a few close friends and compatriots, we discussed, debated and differed throughout the day on what it meant to be “marginalized sexuality people”, what could or should be done with the categories of sex and gender – which of the two was redundant and which was essential. In the process we came upon some very uncomfortable but nevertheless significant questions.

The morning session started with sharing of experiences by the different sexuality groups. The sharing brought up interesting insights about the tension-fraught partnership that these groups have often shared with other organizations – partnerships that were marked at times by moments of unconditional support and at other times complete withdrawal without explanation. People existing on the fringes and invisibilized spaces, such as these, have always looked for support from feminist spaces – support, both physical and conceptual – and found it, but sometimes it has come with its cost and has been conditional. Homophobia has often reared its ugly head even in feminist spaces, and has been fanned and used at times to crush any semblance of a lesbian standpoint whenever it has arisen. While the effort to ally with other social movements has been active, the impulse not to lose one’s difference, one’s solitude in a happy amalgamation and a chorus of solidarity, has also been strong. In times of crisis, efforts of the lesbian groups at alliance-building have been completely undermined and their identities marked as only lesbians-and-therefore-separatists! While such experiences have brought a lot of pain, they have also led to greater self reflexivity and provided the impetus to carry further the struggle against divisiveness, and devise new ways to forge a politics of sisterhood.

The evening session started throwing up subtle differences between lesbian and heterosexual women as also the mainstream feminist movement and the sexuality rights movement on the issue of marriage. A discussion on the ethics and politics of a lesbian way of life came with a critique of the institution of marriage and family. The heteronormative family, particularly its patriarchal and exploitative nature, came in for strong critique in the narratives of some lesbian friends and it was interesting to note how many of us have redefined family to include friends and support groups. Some lesbian activists argued that marriage should have to go completely and the critique of marriage would have to come from the mainstream feminist movement with the onus lying on heterosexual women. It was felt that though challenging norms has proved an important political move of marginalized groups it has often led to a certain complacency on the part of the so-called mainstream and opened the margins to unfair criticism at the slightest hint of ‘conformation’. For instance, the issue of violence among same-sex couples came up for discussion and it was felt that incidents of violence were more common in those couples who mimed the heterosexual mode of living with rigid and intact gender roles, who were in same-sex relations but liked to imagine themselves as heterosexual. This analysis generated protests from different quarters. Is violence a fallout only of gender stereotypes, it was queried? Is not violence also a feature among same-sex couples who may not be in a stereotypical relation? Another interjection that came up on the issue of marriage was: rather than discussing who should have the right to marry (the right to marry among non-heterosexual partners has been an important demand of the sexuality rights movement and a reality in some countries) and whose duty it is to critique marriage, what is perhaps more pertinent is a rethinking of relationships. If it is a felt need that relations of togetherness have to be rethought then

how does it matter who does it first and in what way? While it is understood that the hegemonic cannot be allowed the unquestioned comfort of occupying the normative space, it is also important to understand that the lives of the marginalized *per se* may not necessarily provide a better standpoint for politics. Moreover it was felt that a greater challenge worth taking up could be the process of engaging with those who do not question the security of identities and who do not identify with the rebellion in spite of inhabiting the margins.

The evening session was titled: questioning gender. As one queer feminist recounted, the essentialism and determinism inherent in the anatomical model of the male/female that constructs the world in a binary of two sexes and two corresponding genders has been adequately questioned within feminism. This has led to the insight that sex is biological but gender is a social construct. This understanding of sex as fixed was challenged further, among others, by transgender, transexual people and queer theorists with the consequent conclusion that along with gender, sex was also a constructed category and male/female, man/woman were all created entities. Thus if sex itself is a construct it could be treated as a redundant category and what became primary then is the struggle to dismantle the gendering process such that irrespective of what we are born as, we can have the freedom to be what we want. This was proposed to be the way to liberation for men, women, lesbian, gay and transgender people – a way to stop “seeing a rainbow colored world in black and white.”

## Let's face it: the need to queer feminism!

On the face of it this seemed not a bad proposition – to move beyond the essentialism of sex as given and immutable. Specially given the context of the present conference where we had participants who were biological female (i.e., sex female), transgender men/women (i.e., sex female, gender masculine; and sex male, gender feminine) but *no males* (i.e., sex male, gender masculine – men who possessed a ‘natural’ ‘biological’ penis, so to speak). In this context it was interesting to note the transgender women (F to Ms) who were categorically masculine in their style statement, as well as grammatically correct in their oral statements – who refused to be addressed as women because they believed and behaved as men only (they chided people who introduced them as women).

While the urge to move out of sex essentialism is welcome, one feels uncomfortable with the proposal to disavow one’s body – its materiality, its pains, pleasures which are no doubt tied intimately to its specificity as sexed – male or female. Moreover, if sex was so redundant, why do some of our friends present there at that very moment, go to such lengths to add or remove specific parts of their body in order to achieve a more ‘complete’ sense of being. And obviously such reconstructive surgery was not cosmetic but very significant for them ... sometimes for survival even. What then becomes pertinent is perhaps not a total abandon of the body, but the need to rethink our notion of the body and sex as *only* biological and anatomical – defined and determined by the specifics of chromosomes, hormones, gonads or genitals.

Among the reasons offered for keeping men out of the conference proceedings, one reason was that the conference was a platform for all who identified themselves as women and suffered similar kind of oppression *as women*. But the category of ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ do not necessarily correspond always to the known categories of men and women. In this analysis, women as a ‘class’ were seen as oppressed – and therefore “*ex officio* feminists” – while men were easily identified as oppressors. The exclusion of men merely on the basis of their biological sex serves to once again essentialize the sex-gender binary by suggesting that all biological females are necessarily situated in a vulnerable position of victimization and all biological males occupy a position of domination by virtue of possessing a penis. Somewhere in this easy classification and categorization we

# আইনের লিঙ্গ-স্বরূপ? বিজ্ঞানের লিঙ্গ-স্বরূপ?

## অনুপ ধর

এই পৃথিবী 'দুই'-এর পৃথিবী। এই পৃথিবীর সবকিছুকেই আমরা 'দুই'-এর ছকে বুঝি। উত্তর-মেরু দক্ষিণ-মেরুর দুই। পূর্ব-পশ্চিম-এর দুই। সাদা কালোর 'দুই'। অ্যাকশন-রিঅ্যাকশন-এর দুই। সভ্য-বর্বরের 'দুই'। প্রকৃতি-সংস্কৃতির 'দুই'। বড়-ছোটর দুই। পুরুষ-নারীর 'দুই'।

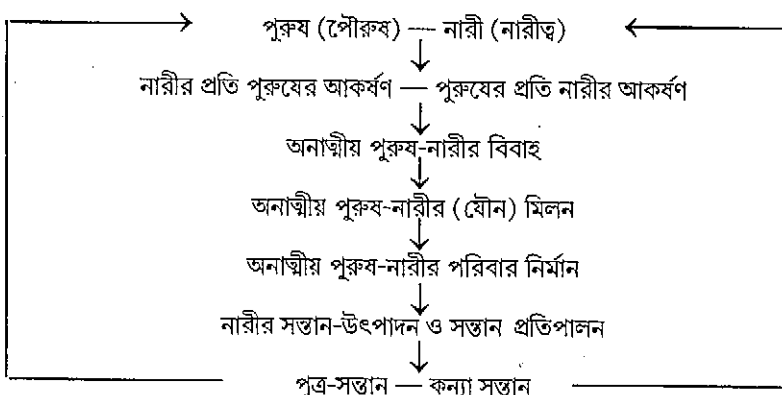
আমাদের চারপাশটাকে, আমাদের চারপাশের পৃথিবীটাকে শুধুমাত্র 'দুই'-টি সম্ভাবনায় ভেঙ্গে ফেলার অভ্যাসটা এবার বোধহয় ছাড়ার সময় হয়েছে। ছাড়ার সময় হয়েছে পূর্ব-নির্দিষ্ট 'দুই'-এর ছকে পৃথিবীকে ভেঙ্গে ফেলার অভ্যাসটা।

এই 'দুই' আবার কখনও কখনও এক স্বতঃসিদ্ধ দুই-ও বটে। যেমন পুরুষ এবং নারীর স্বতঃসিদ্ধ 'দুই'। জৈব পুরুষ এবং জৈব নারীর স্বতঃসিদ্ধ 'দুই'। বায়োলজি বইয়ের 'দুই'। মেল-ফিমেলের 'দুই'। এমন এক 'দুই' যা বায়োলজিক্যাল-ই গিভেন। যা প্রকৃতিপ্রদত্ত। জৈবিকভাবে যা পূর্বপ্রদত্ত। চারপাশে শুধু দুই। শুধু দুই। স্বাভাবিক ওয়েডস সৌভিক। সেই দুই। পাত্র-পাত্রীর বিজ্ঞাপন --- পাত্রীর জন্য পুরুষ-পাত্র চাই আর পাত্রের জন্য নারী-পাত্রী চাই। সেই দুই। ইলেকট্রিকের প্লাগ আর প্লাগ-পয়েন্ট --- তাদেরও নাম দিলাম 'মেল-ফিমেল'। পরিবারের পরিসরে দাদু-দিদা --- দুই। বাবা-মা --- দুই। ভাই-বোন --- দুই। স্কুলে --- বয়েজ স্কুল এবং গার্লস স্কুল। কলেজে বয়েজ কমন রুম এবং লেডিজ কমন রুম। টয়লেট --- জেন্টস এবং লেডিজ। সেই দুই। মেল ওয়ার্ড। ফিমেল ওয়ার্ড। দুই। ডাস হ্রোর-এ নাচছে দুটি মেয়ে --- দুজনের মধ্যে একজন যেন পুরুষের মত করে নাচছে, আর অন্যজন যেন নারীর মত করে নাচছে। দুটি মেয়ে একে অন্যকে ভালবাসে --- দুজনের মধ্যে একজন কিছুটা মেয়েলি, অন্যজন কিছুটা পুরুষালি। দুটি মেয়ে একে অন্যকে আদর করছে --- একজন যেন পুরুষের রোল-প্লে করছে আর অন্যজন যেন নারীর রোল-প্লে করছে। পশু-পাখি-শামুক-কেঁচোর পৃথিবীটাও আমরা ভেঙ্গে ফেললাম সেই পুরুষ-নারীর ছকে --- ভেঙ্গে ফেললাম 'দুই'-এর পরিচিত ছকে। আর উদ্ভিদজগৎ? গাছদের পৃথিবী? গাছদের পৃথিবীটাকে পুরুষ-নারীর 'দুই' এর ছকে ভাঙাটা অত সহজ হল না। আমরা ভেবে নিলাম ফুলের মধ্যে আছে পুরুষ-নারী --- আছে সেই 'দুই'। স্কুলের বইয়ে জবাফুলটাকে চিরে ফেললাম; 'দেখলাম' (আদতে দেখলাম? না যা দেখতে চাই, তাই দেখলাম।) তারও ভিতরে আছে পুরুষ ও নারী, উভয়ই; ফুলের নীচের দিকে যেন আছে একটা ডিম্বকোষ। আর তার উপরে যেন পুরুষালিদের মত দভায়মান ফুলের পুং সত্তাটি। অর্থাৎ, ফুলের সংগঠনটিকেও আমরা ভেবে নিলাম মানুষের অনুসঙ্গে, ভেবে নিলাম পুরুষ-নারীর অনুসঙ্গে। মানুষপ্রজাতির পুরুষ-নারীর ছকে প্রতিবিম্বিত হল, উপস্থাপিত হল ফুলের সংগঠনটি।

এই ভেবে নেওয়ার মধ্যেই ক্রিয়াশীল থাকছে বা থেকেছে আরও একটা ছক। ভাবনার সেই ছকে, সেই ধরণ-ধরণে পুরুষ ও নারী যেন দুটি বিপরীতার্থক যৌন-স্বরূপ --- "মেন অ্যান্ড উইমেন আর দি ওপোজিট সেক্স"। তারা বিপরীত --- যেন তারা প্রকৃতিপ্রদত্তভাবেই বিপরীত। স্কুলের বইতে, পাড়ার রকে শেখানো হতে থাকে যে তারা বিপরীত। বড় হতে হতে আমরা কোথাও বিশ্বাস করতে শুরু করি যে তারা বিপরীত। তাদের শরীর সংগঠনে বিপরীত; তাদের মন-মানসিকাতায় বিপরীত। অর্থাৎ ভাবনার এই ছকে পৃথিবীটাকে শুধু 'দুই'-য়ে ভেঙ্গে ফেলা হচ্ছে না; পৃথিবীটাকে ভেঙ্গে ফেলা হচ্ছে বিপরীতার্থক এক 'দুই'-এ। ভেঙ্গে ফেলা হচ্ছে ইনটু অ্যান ওপোজিশনাল টু। ভেঙ্গে ফেলা হচ্ছে একইসঙ্গে যেন, 'দুই' এবং 'বিপরীতার্থক দুই'-এ।

পুরুষ ও নারীকে এক বিপরীতার্থক 'দুই'-এ ভেঙ্গে ফেলার মধ্য দিয়ে তাদের মধ্যকার আকাঙ্ক্ষার ভূগোলটাও যেন তৈরী হয়ে যাচ্ছে, তৈরী হয়ে যাচ্ছে প্রায় সঙ্গে সঙ্গে। পুরুষ-নারী বিপরীত --- ওপোজিট পোলস অ্যাট্রাক্ট, লাইক পোলস রিপেল --- বিপরীত মেরুর মধ্যে থাকে আকর্ষণ আর সমমেরুর মধ্যে থাকে বিকর্ষণ --- ফিজিক্স তো আমাদের এটাই শিখিয়েছে --- পুরুষ ও নারীর মধ্যে তাই থাকছে আকর্ষণ এবং পুরুষ-পুরুষ ও নারী-নারীর মধ্যে থাকছে বিকর্ষণ। পুরুষ-নারীর এই আকর্ষণ তাই যেন স্বাভাবিক 'দুই' থেকে 'বিপরীতার্থক দুই'-এর মধ্যে আকর্ষণ-এর স্বাভাবিকতা একটা ছকে সাজিয়ে ফেলেছে পৃথিবীটাকে।

এই ছকটা অনেকটা এইরকম :



এই ছকের মধ্যে যাঁরা থাকেন তাঁরা 'স্বাভাবিক'।

এবং এই ছকের মধ্যে যাঁরা থাকছেন না তাঁরা যেন 'অস্বাভাবিক'।

এই ছকের মধ্যে যাঁরা কিছুটা হলেও নেই তাঁরা 'অল্পবিস্তর অস্বাভাবিক' বা 'অ-সুস্থ'।

যেমন, যে নারী সন্তান উৎপাদন করতে পারে না, সে অল্পবিস্তর অস্বাভাবিক; কারণ সে বন্ধ্যা। যেমন, যে পুরুষ বা নারী (প্রচলিত অর্থে) যৌনমিলনে অক্ষম, অর্থাৎ প্রবেশকেন্দ্রিক লিঙ্গ-যৌনি সম্পর্কে (পেনিট্রেটিভ সেক্স-এ) অক্ষম, সেও অল্পবিস্তর অস্বাভাবিক। যে পুরুষ বা নারীর যৌনতা, প্রবেশকেন্দ্রিক লিঙ্গ-যৌনি সম্পর্কের নয়, যার যৌনতা অন্যরকম, সেও অল্পবিস্তর অস্বাভাবিক। যে পুরুষ-নারী সম্পর্কিত অথচ যাঁরা বিবাহ করেননি, তাঁরাও যেন অল্পবিস্তর অস্বাভাবিক। যে পুরুষ-নারী যৌন অর্থে সম্পর্কিত, অথচ যাঁরা আদতে রক্তের সম্পর্কের আত্মীয়, তাঁরাও তো অস্বাভাবিক। যে পুরুষ নারীর প্রতি আকর্ষণ বোধ করেন না, যিনি আকর্ষণ বোধ করেন অন্য একটি পুরুষের প্রতি, সে তো অবশ্যই অস্বাভাবিক। এবং সবশেষে, যে নারী পুরুষের প্রতি আকর্ষণ বোধ করেন না, যিনি আকর্ষণ বোধ করেন অন্য একটি নারীর প্রতি সেও তো অবশ্যই অস্বাভাবিক। যে পুরুষের ব্যবহার পুরুষালি নয়, সে অল্পবিস্তর অস্বাভাবিক; সে কেমন যেন। পুরুষ-দেহ নিয়ে জন্মেও যে নিজেকে মেয়ে ভাবে, বা মেয়ে হতে চায়, সে অস্বাভাবিক। যে মেয়ে মেয়েলি নয়, যে কোমল নয়, সে অল্পবিস্তর অস্বাভাবিক। নারী দেহ নিয়ে জন্মেও যে মেয়ে পুরুষ হতে চায়, সে অস্বাভাবিক। যে পুরুষ সম্পূর্ণত পুরুষ নয়, সে অস্বাভাবিক। যে নারী সম্পূর্ণত নারী নয়, সে অস্বাভাবিক।

অর্থাৎ, অস্বাভাবিকতার আরোপগুলি অনেকভাবে আসতে পারে। আসতে পারে

(১) শরীরের স্তরে --- যদি কারও শরীর পূর্ণ অর্থে পুরুষের মত বা নারীর মত না হয় তাহলে সে অস্বাভাবিক; যদিও পূর্ণ অর্থে পুরুষ বা পূর্ণ অর্থে নারী কথাটার মানে আমি খুব একটা ভাল বুঝি না।

(২) ব্যবহারের স্তরে --- যদি কারও ব্যবহার বা চালচলন তার যৌন-স্বরূপের সঙ্গে, অর্থাৎ তার সেক্স-এর সঙ্গে সামঞ্জস্য না হয়; অর্থাৎ যদি কোনও জৈবিক পুরুষ তার ব্যবহারে পুরুষালি না হয় এবং যদি কোনও জৈবিক নারী তার ব্যবহারে নারীসুলভ না হয়, তাহলে সে অস্বাভাবিক।

(৩) আকর্ষণের স্তরে --- পুরুষে-পুরুষে বা নারীতে-নারীতে আকর্ষণ অস্বাভাবিক।

(৪) অনান্যীয়দের মধ্যে আকর্ষণ ও সম্পর্কস্থাপন স্বাভাবিক, আত্মীয়দের মধ্যে আকর্ষণ ও সম্পর্কস্থাপন অস্বাভাবিক।

(৫) ক্রিয়ার স্তরে --- প্রবেশকেন্দ্রিক লিঙ্গ-যৌনি ক্রিয়া স্বাভাবিক। পেনিট্রেটিভ পিনো-ভ্যাজাইনাল সেক্স ইজ নর্মাল। এর বাইরে যে কোনও যৌনক্রিয়া অস্বাভাবিক। প্রবেশকেন্দ্রিক ক্রিয়াতে অক্ষম যারা, তারা অস্বাভাবিক। যে নারী প্রবেশকেন্দ্রিক লিঙ্গ-যৌনি সম্পর্কে অপারগ সে 'ফ্রিজিড'; তার চিকিৎসা প্রয়োজন।

(৬) উৎপাদনের স্তরে --- বন্ধ্যা নারী অস্বাভাবিক। সমযৌন সম্পর্কের পুরুষ বা নারী অস্বাভাবিক, কারণ তারা সন্তান উৎপাদন করতে পারে না।

অর্থাৎ, যৌনতা ও যৌনক্রিয়ার যেন আছে একটা চেনা ভূগোল --- সেই ভূগোলে লিঙ্গ এবং যৌনি নামক দুটি অনান্যীয় শরীর পরিসর বা স্পেস স্বীকৃত। এই স্বীকৃত শরীর-পরিসর বা স্পেসদুটির মধ্যকার সম্পর্কও স্বীকৃত। শরীর-এর বাদবাকি অংশের ব্যবহার প্রাক-ক্রিয়া বা ফোর-প্লে-র অংশভাগ হতে পারে, কিন্তু কখনই 'চরম' বা ফাইনাল অ্যাক্ট হতে পারে না। কারণ যৌনতা ও যৌনক্রিয়ার আছে একটা স্বীকৃত ব্যাকরণ, একটা প্রতিষ্ঠিত ইতিহাস। সেই ব্যাকরণ, সেই ইতিহাস যেন আগে থেকেই ঠিক করে রেখেছে যৌনতা ও যৌনক্রিয়ার শুরু কোথায়, শেষ কোথায়, ঠিক করে রেখেছে যৌনতা ও যৌনক্রিয়া কোন খাতে বইবে, কেমনভাবে বইবে। এবং সবাইকে সেই বহুত খাত, সেই আধিপত্যকারী ছক মেনেই যেন চলতে হবে। যারা সেই ছক ভাঙবে তারাই যেন অস্বাভাবিক।

আর এই অস্বাভাবিকদের নিয়ে কী করা হবে? এই অস্বাভাবিকদের ভুলে থাকা যেতে পারে; এদের উপেক্ষা করা যেতে পারে; এমন ভান করা যেতে পারে যেন এরা নেই; যেন এরা অনুপস্থিত। এই অস্বাভাবিকদের নিয়ে হাস্যহাসি করা যেতে পারে; এদের উপহাসের পাত্র করে তোলা যেতে পারে। আবার এদের শাস্তি দেওয়া যেতে পারে; এদের জেলে ভরা যেতে পারে। এমন পরিস্থিতি সৃষ্টি করা যেতে পারে যে এরা বেছে নিতে বাধ্য হয় আত্মহননের পথ। আমাদের মেয়েগুলো আত্মহত্যার পথ বেছে নিচ্ছে কখনও কখনও;



# About *Parma* – the support group for same-sex relationships, Baroda

Maya Sharma

Violence against women was one of the globally chosen themes for International Women's Day 2000. During planning meetings for the public march in Delhi, the issue of forcible separations leading to suicides committed by women who wanted to live with one another was brought up and a need to show support through inclusion of lesbian rights was expressed by CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights) and other supportive autonomous women's groups. But the left mass-based women's groups resisted the inclusion of the word "lesbian" and reference to the whole issue in the literature to be distributed on March 8th. The issue of Women loving women was not seen as crucial as hunger and poverty.

Subsequent to these meetings, various women's groups met again to come to a consensus regarding the need to publicly press for lesbian rights, and so that discussions and meetings amongst the different groups could be held later to discuss homosexuality and evolve an understanding on the issue. At one such meeting it was shared that the lack of information about lesbians and the absence of documentation of a sufficient and specific number of cases of lesbian life prevented women's groups from going against the majority voice in the Indian culture. In response we made presentations. We mostly described individual cases that had already been reported in the press. The stories we knew of lacked a face; women's own voices and the context within which they lived their daily lives was missing. We had no knowledge of events following the exposure and the outcry raised by public scandal. We also became aware that amongst the groups involved in gay rights activism, working-class voices were almost completely missing. The irony was that the women who came into public gaze were mostly from the working class and yet the argument of not addressing lesbian rights was often on the grounds that the working class would not identify with the issue. It was then that the idea of writing stories of working class women who loved women began to take shape.

Around the same time *Vikalp* began to work around HIV/AIDS with the workers in informal sector. Prior to the HIV/AIDS awareness work, *Vikalp's* involvement with women's health had also raised issues of sexuality, though often in the context of maternal health or violence against women; the presence of single women brought in other perspectives challenging the limited way sexuality was being defined. The widely spreading work around HIV/AIDS opened up a space to talk about sex and sexuality. Encouraged by these developments *Vikalp* as an organization stepped in to support the idea of writing stories of working class lesbian women – to give the context and name the everyday struggles of women who loved women.

The research documenting the life stories of working-class lesbian women was undertaken on behalf of *Vikalp* based in Gujarat. It stemmed from a personal journey of emergence from a space of silences and half-truths, and was committed to engaging in advocacy work for the rights of same-sex relationships. Its location has been the contested socio-cultural fissure between the private and the public domain, as well as private and public discourses about alternative sexualities, choices and practices. The context within which the writings took place is rooted in the women's movement in India.

Indian culture and society in general view the female body as a site for all kinds of action and reaction, but not as a legitimate space for sexual autonomy or personal agency. Women's sexual experiences are generally understood solely within the established parameters of reproduction. Within this framework, the life experiences of lesbian women have been almost completely

invalidated because sex/sexuality are generally understood only in relation to a heterosexual paradigm of oppositional duality, that prescribes gender roles and gendered social codes; those who violate these roles and codes are seen as transgressive, condemned as obscene, and perceived as appropriate subjects for various forms of persecution and punishment.

Women's sexual rights are not seen as fundamental or inalienable. Through the women's movement it has become possible to bring into public discourse sexual and domestic violence and make laws for protection against such violations. Change can be seen. Victims of rape, abduction and sexual slavery, dowry, battery, abuse, feticide, harassment and gender-biased laws such as those of inheritance and divorce, do come forward to testify, do make their suffering public, do confront their oppressors, be it the family, community or state. With media assistance, they occasionally become role models for others in similar situations. The state has begun to acknowledge, at least theoretically, women's needs – for childcare facilities, workplace safety, equal wages, benefits, the right to strike and unionize. There is legislation, albeit controversial, regarding political representation for women, reproductive rights, and sexual health. Women who were traditionally seen to be home-makers and their role confined to the domestic sphere, are now being given, by law, facilities that ensure greater participation in the labour market and the public sphere.

In contrast to this, the women's movement has adopted a policy of distancing itself from issues related to homosexual women. While it has not extended public/political support, it has indeed provided valuable support privately, taking up individual cases, advocating, intervening, resolving. This support is appreciated by its direct beneficiaries as well as activist groups, yet because it has been private it remains unknown to the general public and inaccessible to others who are most urgently in need of it. This mode of support, that simultaneously involves mechanisms of denial, operating under the larger umbrella of cultural silence around issues of alternative sexuality, enmeshes homoerotic desire and its practices in phobia and prejudice.

The process of collecting and completing stories in 2003, showed there was a need for a space for women to talk, share their experiences and overcome isolation. Taking back the research into the field *Vikalp* conceived of *Parma* – the name of god Shiva who represents both the female and the male energies. An application to the post office equipped us with a post box number; the purpose was to reach and inform lesbian women about the group. The first simple advertisement which talked openly of women who loved women was not acceptable in the regional newspapers. The terminology was changed to single women. The English edition of *The Times of India* finally published the advertisement. Both the strategies we followed had limitations. We were well aware that the strategy of using the terminology of 'single' for those women who actually lived in partnerships was far from correct and painful though it was, the usage of the language of patriarchy was yet again limiting women's sexuality to a heterosexist model since single by implication is women who live outside the institution of marriage.

An English advertisement also restricted our reach to the literate women and amongst them the probability would be that those reaching us would be the middle class, since education in English is affordable mostly by the middle class. We asked ourselves if we were deviating from our goal of reaching the marginalized and the working class women. However, sharing our own lives helped us to understand that though middle class

and literate, many of our own lives were lived in fear and isolation. We understood then that we still carried within us the context of writing the stories to prove the existence of lesbians in the working class and therefore the relevance of addressing lesbians despite poverty. Though it was important to reach a holistic understanding that made the linkages with poverty and sexuality – initiating *Parma* helped us to re-articulate our aims and centre our perspective of reaching women who loved women across different classes.

The rejection of the advertisement about lesbian women made us aware that we would have to resort to different strategies of being open at different times and places. Also, involved as we were in the issue, the rejection made us aware of what we were up against. It was a reality test. The society was not going to concede that easily. Yet at the same time we saw how crucial it was that some of us tell the truth about our lives. Merely talking of some women who loved women without specificities did not enable our reach or end the isolation of women. On the other hand our talking revealed the women who associated with us. Caught between telling the full or half truth *Parma* is at an intersection both as part and separate from *Vikalp* – it gets a protective cover from the larger society as well as the State.

### Meeting media, taking public stands

An opportunity to break out of the situation presented itself when a much-publicized lesbian film named 'Girlfriend' was attacked. As *Parma*, we responded to protests against an allegedly 'lesbian' and commercial film, called 'Girlfriend.' Following which newspapers contacted us including the regional newspapers and magazines. They wanted interviews of people involved in *Parma*. In talking with the regional newspapers we could reach the women within Gujarat who read and wrote Gujarati. Those of us lesser known as *Vikalp* activists met the journalists under *Parma* and insisted that the PO box number be talked of in the article as well. The strategy paid off and since then many more women have got in touch across different classes – working and middle class, many of them out of Baroda, as far as southern India. It became clear that the middle class women needed a space as much as the working class lesbian women. The material comforts were no compensation for isolation and an expressed need for sharing and simply talking. We have since attempted meeting some of them in Gandhinagar, Ahmedabad, Rajkot and Surendernagar, to others we have spoken over the telephone and written letters.

### Identifying and organizing lesbian women

We tried to overcome the limitation of class by actively seeking out lesbian women in the communities where we worked in the rural, tribal areas and regularizing the contacts we had built during the time of writing life stories. Going in the field as *Vikalp* activists helped in talking about same-sex relationships. Our current work on the issue revolves round identifying lesbian women, intervening in individual lives and holding one-to-one interactions. Organizing out of town day-long trips/picnics has been simpler than holding shared, large meetings. Most women work in the informal sector and to find a long stretch of common available time has been difficult to arrange. Till now we have identified 25 lesbian women in different parts.

In July 2004, networking with different groups in Mumbai, Bangalore and Delhi, *Parma* planned a workshop with LABIA. The women who we were in touch with expressed eagerness and willingness to join in the workshop. However we made the mistake of talking aloud with a media woman about the forthcoming workshop, we also shared the fact that women who loved women lived in the tribal areas as well. The news story published on the day of the workshop by two names prevented some of the women from joining the workshop. They felt they had to be seen in the neighborhood on the days the workshop was to take place so as to prove otherwise.

But for another woman the workshop became an excuse to venture out to meet her girl friend. Her parents had met and knew us as *Vikalp* activists. Before the workshop, the woman had told her parents that she would be going to attend *Vikalp's* three-

day workshop. On the designated day she left the house early, her parents assuming that she would be joining us. Later however when her parents read the story with our names under a different organization, they called us and wanted us to send their daughter back. Shocked, they did not expect 'us' to support 'such people'. However her absence from the workshop and the fact that we had no idea about her whereabouts saved us from telling her parents the full truth and we succeeded in keeping the communication open with her parents and with her. We let her know her parents had called and advised her to talk to them. On the other hand, through the news story, women learnt about *Parma* and tried desperately to get in touch. The process taught us that being 'open and out' determined by a number of factors has to also be carefully planned.

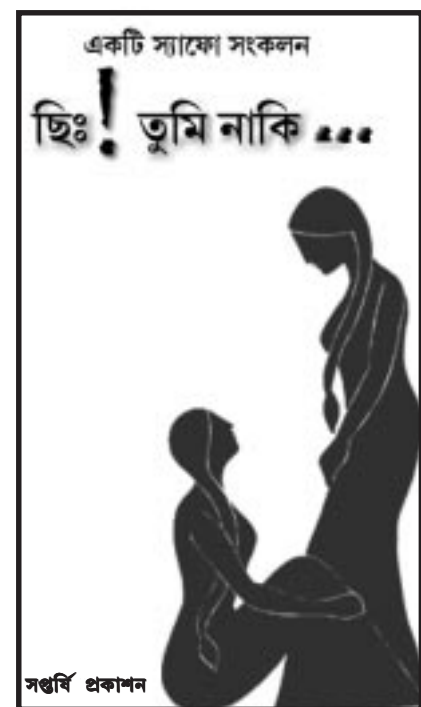
### Interventions and fact-finding visits

*Parma* has made several interventions to enable choices of people in same-sex relationships. In January 2006, the elopement of two girls from oppressed backgrounds involved *Parma* and ensuring safety to the two women involved intense networking at various levels. It also enabled us to see the places at which the police and several other institutions such as the law, family connive to thwart choices of homosexual people. Fact-finding visits such as the alleged suicide of two women in Mehasana district has raised for us the crucial questions of protection of women and the need to include issues of same-sex relationships in the wider campaigns of violence against women.

As we progress and mature we see the need to address and approach sexuality as related to various vulnerable groups including women who are single and sex workers. As *Parma* we have recently begun work with men who identify themselves as having same-sex relationships.

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আমাদের কথা - আমাদের কলমে



দ্বিতীয় ও পরিবর্ধিত সংস্করণ প্রকাশিত হয়েছে

পাওয়া যাচ্ছে বইমেলায়

লিটল ম্যাগাজিন এনক্লেভ - এ

‘স্যাফো ফর ইকুয়ালিটি’র টেবিলে



# Queering Justice: Polymorphously Yours

Sutanuka

## ***Boi-mela 2006 theke Boimela 2007 : ek bochhor kete gelo***

I joined *Sappho for Equality* in November 2005 and in the last Kolkata Book Fair (Jan-Feb, 2006) many of you must have seen me with some others, distributing *Swakanthey* in the fair. It was the first time that I experienced the famous Kolkata Book Fair – for which book lovers, not only from Kolkata but from across the country and abroad look forward to eagerly, and, to which some of my friends refer as “the ten-day long carnival, post-Christmas” – in a completely different way. The 2006 Kolkata Book Fair found me moving around excitedly not as a book lover but as a news hawker trying to voice the anguish of some of my friends who have been labeled by our society as ‘sexually marginalized women’ and denied their right to live. Yes, I tried to reach out to people by selling *Swakanthey* along with my friends of *Sappho* and *Sappho for Equality*.

There were a few who expressed concern and interest about the issue. However, most of the responses were indicative of the extent of homophobia present among us. Young girls and boys ran away. Some intended to buy but were unable to do so, either due to strong peer pressure or due to “spouse pressure”. One commented: “I cannot imagine a world with such women”. Some seemed to have no time to think about such issues and showed their impatience rather openly, while others were totally unaware of the fact and did not want to get into such complexities. There were few who did not believe that my lesbian friends should be entitled to the right to life; they believed such ‘abnormalities’ and ‘perversions’ pollute our ‘normal’ society.

Are homosexuals abnormal?

Then what is normal?

What is the reason for such homophobia?

Do my lesbian friends really have no right to live?

Today, it is November 2006 when I am writing this piece and in these ten months we have lost six of our friends who committed suicide because this society did not allow them to live as lesbians. Some of them have left behind suicide notes that clearly point out societal intolerance towards same-sex couples as the reason for taking such a drastic step.

## ***“Chand uttechhe, phool phutechhe; Kadam talaye ke? Hati nachchhe ghora nachchhe khukumani-r be”:*** **Naturalized Heterosexuality**

Mainstream society that propagates compulsory reproductive heterosexuality as ‘normal’ has set it as a standard against which non-heterosexuality is held to be ‘abnormal’, thereby ensuring no sexual rights for them, and furthermore, branding them as ‘perverts’ and ‘diseased’ – as if heterosexuality has sprung out of nature. One could argue that if heterosexuality is really as natural as it is made out to be, then why do we see a girl or boy child being ‘trained’ for a legitimate heterosexual relationship right from their birth? A recall of the very commonly used rhymes sung to make babies sleep in Bengali families would illustrate my point. “*Dol dol duluni ranga mathaye chiruni bor asbe ekhuni niye jabe tokkhuni*” (Rock a’ baby to n’ fro, Comb your hair and tie a bow, With your husband off you go), is sung in case of a girl child, whereas, for a boy child it is: “*Dol dol duluni ranga mathaye chiruni bou asbe ekhuni ghore tulbo tokkhuni*” (Rock a’ baby rock n’ roll, Comb it hard n’ style it all, Grab your wife and have a ball). Several such instances can show how there occurs a constant reinforcement within us of the myth that heterosexuality is our only destiny. Thus it can be said that ‘normal’ heterosexuality is a construct. And we continuously live in the trap of the heterosexual norms and standards thinking them to be ‘natural’ and therefore ‘normal’. However, we overlook the politics behind this

naturalization – the politics of ‘heir ship’ – the belief that a successor of the human race can only be born out of a ‘legitimate’ (within marriage) monogamous heterosexual union. While a heterosexual relationship between an unmarried couple is looked down upon, a child born out of such a relationship is labeled as *illegitimate* and abused as *bastard* by the society.

## ***“Byang-e-der saath bhai chole thela garite, chalechhilo biye khete pharing-er barite”:*** **Compulsory Heterosexuality**

It is apparent that in order to fit into the existing societal order one *has* to practice compulsory heterosexuality such that there is no place for those who do not. Thus we keep witnessing more and more suicides of our lesbian friends, while the State remains unmoved. But the question that asks itself is: if the State ensures sexual rights to the non-heterosexuals just like the ones enjoyed by the heterosexuals, will the suicides end? Before discussing about the sexual rights of non-heterosexual people let us take a look at the sexual rights which the members of the heteronormative society are believed to be entitled to. Let me explain from the beginning. Sexual rights are those rights that enable one to express his or her sexuality. However, in the existing patriarchal heteronormative society men and women are seen as the “opposite sexes” such that the two “opposite” sexes are deemed fit for two exclusive social/gender roles. The male sex is presumed to possess a masculine gender role understood as physically strong, intellectually ambitious and sexually charged, while the female quite complementarily is thought to be endowed with the attributes of femininity i.e., physically beautiful, intellectually intuitive and sexually desirable/seductive. Even their desires are said to follow different trajectories. Sexually and otherwise, the *masculine* gender role is to initiate, activate, penetrate and ejaculate. The *feminine* role, quite complementarily, is to resist, respond, receive and reproduce. Sex-gender-desire is thus conceived as each flowing naturally into the other to engender, institute two water-tight identities that are believed to be opposites and in opposition. Such a binary, oppositional, heterosexual framework brings forth a dynamics of asymmetry, subordination, domination and violation. For example, if a man desires to desist from penetrative sex with a woman, refuses the norm of marriage or rejects ‘fatherhood’, he is looked down upon as an emasculated – ‘effeminate’ man. In other words he is labeled as ‘abnormal’ by the society. Again, a heterosexual woman, who does not play by the gender stereotype and takes a proactive role in the sexual act is abused as a ‘whore’. On the other hand, a woman who does not conform to male desire is labeled as frigid, and those who reject marriage and/or motherhood are not cordially accepted in the society either. Hence, sexual ‘rights’ that seem to be naturally given to the ‘normal’ heterosexuals are based on a very narrow and hegemonic imagination of legitimate (within marriage) monogamous penetrative reproductive able-bodied and reasonable sexuality.

If I analyze further the ‘normal sexuality’ in the existing patriarchal society it would be found to be androcentric and phallogocentric as well. The realm of so-called ‘normal’ sexuality holds a man’s sexual desire as central. For example, ‘mainstream’ society often grants legitimization to eve-teasers, by rationalizing that it is natural for a man to tease a woman who ‘provokes’ male sexual urge by dressing ‘seductively’. In other words, man’s sexual aggression is not only held natural, it is also believed that woman’s sexuality consists only in responding and reproducing man’s sexuality and if they fail to do so, they stand the danger of being violated. A man’s imagination of penetrative and reproductive sexuality is given paramount importance, rather it is considered to be The Sexuality and woman’s sexuality can only complement it. Another example can be the complete invisibilization, and thereby, societal legitimization of marital rape.

This imagination of sexuality in actuality contradicts a person's right to preference and self-determination. The legal system that holds heterosexuality as standard, normal, natural, legal and safe, and discriminates non-heterosexuality, fails to ensure equal sexual rights to members of the heteronormative society itself, because it is unable to address the variety of sexual expressions (sexual behaviour) within the fold of heterosexuality. Hence, it is evident that the State as well as the civil society ensures rights only to those who abide by the given hegemonic order (a gender sexuality stereotyping based on his/her anatomical sex i.e., the genitalia s/he is born with).

### ***“Bristi pore tapur tupur nade elo ban, shibthakur-er biye holo tin kanya dan”*: Hegemonic Heterosexuality**

In the present milieu, claiming sexual rights by non-heterosexuals means asking the State and society for benevolence, asking them to widen their rooms such that non-heterosexuals can also be included in it (included in the faulty legal system where its so-called 'normal' members are not entitled with equal rights). Further, this demand for acceptance within the 'mainstream' does not question the terms of inclusion and the given legal status.

To explain further, I would like to quote a report from Hindustan Times (4.11.2006) 'Gay wedding enters Orissa's tribal life' by Soumyajit Pattnaik.

Bhubaneswar: LESBIAN MARRIAGES have entered tribal societies. And the response has been less hostile than in the urban milieu. Two tribal women, Wateka Palang (30) and Maleka Nilisa (25) of Narayanpatna block in the Koraput district tied the knot recently and celebrated the occasion according to tribal customs and by throwing a party.

The tribals' practice of bridegrooms offering dowry to the bride was also followed with Palang's family fulfilling the customary requirements. Palang's mother, a recent beneficiary of the local adult literacy programme, arranged for the dowry – a cow, a liquor bottle and some cash – to be given to the bride's family.

The two women met during a play in their locality. For both, it was 'love at first sight'. As their interactions increased along with their intimacy, they decided to live together and both the families eventually accepted the proposition of their lesbian marriage.

This report informs us that the tribal society of Orissa has acknowledged the same-sex love between Waketa and Maleka. They have included the lesbian couple in their 'mainstream' tribal society, which is a rare occurrence among the so-called 'developed' and 'empowered' societies. However, the tribal society did not give up their heteronormative behavior – the norm that culmination of love is only possible through marriage; marriage is only possible between a groom (male partner either by gender or by sex) and a bride (the female partner either by gender or by sex); marriage is not complete without the ritual of dowry. Though the tribal society accepted the proposition of the lesbian marriage, there were conditions tied to it – conditions to get included in the 'mainstream'. Waketa and Maleka had to walk the path of heteropatriarchy to the extent that Waketa's (the bride) mother had to arrange the customary dowry for Maleka's (the groom) family. Therefore it is evident that achieving rights and wishing to get included in the 'mainstream' necessarily fixes us within a set of conditions, which we have to abide by. Consequently the 'mainstream' norms remain unquestioned, within the 'mainstream' as also at the 'margin'.

### **Plurality vs polymorphosity**

In the preceding section we have seen how by allowing same-sex marriages, the 'mainstream' accommodates plurality without facing any challenge to their norms. Plurality comes from the word *plural* meaning more than one; several things occurring together, each with a fixed core identity. Polymorphosity on the other hand, comes from *polymorph* meaning many-formed i.e., the same thing occurring in many forms. Waketa and Maleka are included in the 'mainstream' heterosexual society in a happy

plurality that accepts their lesbian identity. This immutable lesbian identity even bound them within strict norms where they have to behave in a particular way. Moreover they have to maintain this identity to remain included in the 'mainstream'. But sexual behaviors/desires are always in flux and thus it becomes impossible to try and categorize them under different immutable identities. The fluidity of sexuality can only be understood if we could imagine it to be polymorphous, as existing and being expressed continuously in changed forms such that it is impossible to fix it in any rigid, watertight identity. The quote below by Akshay Khanna (2005) will explain what I mean by polymorphosity.

I have a penis that I love, she's called a pussy in some circles. My Italian lover has a pussy too, *sometimes*. Am I straight? Am I gay? Am I bisexual?

When I had just started moving around in the definedly non-heterosexual circles (maybe I should call them 'gay'), this question tortured every moment of self-reflection. Tormented by 'you're just in denial that you are gay', and alternatively, 'face it, you are straight, but you say you're not just because it's cool', I spent many nights staring at the mirror asking myself, what am I? ... I never did come to terms with 'the fact' that I was gay. Or bisexual. I decided not to. I decided, privileged as I was, that I did not need to name myself on the basis of my desires. There was something wrong if whom I fucked said everything about what I am.

[‘Beyond Sexuality (?)’ in *Because I Have a Voice. Queer Politics in India* ed. Arvind Narrain and Goutam Bhan]

Akshay Khanna names his penis a pussy – a term commonly referring to the vagina in 'mainstream'. Thus we can assume that he loves to believe himself as a possessor of a vagina. Again he states that his Italian lover also has a pussy *sometimes*. The word *sometimes* is to be noted here – the Italian lover possesses a penis; however at times he loves to believe his penis to be a pussy i.e. a vagina. Here both Akshay Khanna and his Italian lover refuse to fit themselves in neat slots of straight, gay or bisexual by defining their selves, based on sexual desires. However, under the Heterosexual Order we often find that a man/woman who desires for their 'opposite sex' is given an immutable identity of a straight man/woman. On the other hand a man/woman with same-sex preferences is labeled with an equally immutable identity of a gay or a lesbian.

Gays and lesbians are consequently discriminated from the 'majority', 'normal' 'mainstream' straight men/women and abused as 'perverts', 'diseased', 'abnormal', 'unnatural', such that in the face of immense social ostracization they are even compelled to kill themselves. To combat this reality of discrimination and the overwhelming homophobic attitude in the society, marginalized sexuality groups have carried on a sustained campaign. They have demanded legal reforms that recognize their sexuality as non-criminal and ensure them a safe and non-discriminatory environment. All such movements for sexual rights have based their claims to a legitimate space on a certain self-identity. This claim to recognition, acknowledgement of what one is, is further premised on the ability to define oneself clearly. The proliferating modes of acknowledging one's particular erotic sense of self has resulted in more and more communities being identified everyday based on specific sexual practices and behaviours, for example, gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex, queer and so on. But as we see from the above quote it is not only difficult but practically impossible to confine sexuality into distinct boxes with permanent labels. Sexuality is polymorphous and necessarily in flux. Any assertions of an identity based on one's sexuality are problematic. So is the project of sexual rights based on sexual identities. There always remains the risk of excluding someone or the other (who does not fit in the present definition), whenever a rights claim is proposed on the basis of a certain (sexual) identity group. This risk of exclusion can only be eliminated, at least to a certain extent, if sexuality is conceptualized in terms other than those of a core identity or selfhood.

However, I am not asking to stop the campaign for repealing or reforming IPC 377. Indeed the rights framework can function as an important means to point out exclusions operating under the normative garb of taboos, conventions and traditions.

But we should also understand that the discourse of rights can often become a good method for normativization (as we have seen from the news report quoted above). They function only to lessen or change the conditions of discrimination rather than challenging the systems of subordination. Moreover, claiming rights is inevitably a demonstration of empowerment. Rights are for those who have a voice, who have mastered the language and method to represent self-interests, in other words a subject of masculine rationality.

Perhaps what we need is a queering of the law. By queering the law I mean to radically rethink the presumptions that inform law, its institutions and the social order. Even if changes are made in IPC 377 to benefit the non-heterosexuals, if these changes takes off from the basic assumption that heterosexuality is the normal, conventional, natural or the majoritarian way of life, then such changes however progressive shall remain confined within the courtroom and it would not impact the lives of the non-heterosexuals in any better way. The existing homophobia would

prevail. Parents would protect their children from becoming queer or would try to cure their 'queerness'.

Queering the world can open new horizons of sexuality where everybody could live their polymorphosities beyond the binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, hetero/homo, active/passive and so on. As stated by one of my seniors, to change the world view, our wor(l)d view should be changed first. From the rhymes sung to babies, to the slangs used in a friends' bash, we need to understand the politics of language because it is the medium through which the 'mainstream' worldview is upheld as 'normal' and all other possibilities are labeled 'abnormal', and consequently pushed to the margin. We need to change the language of our thoughts, we need to change the language through which the world is made visible and knowable to us. Only by challenging the familiar, by queering the normal, can we dream of changing the world. For this we need to open our thought processes to different possibilities.

■ Sutanuka - active member of Sappho for Equality

## Am I that sex? When our lips speak gender sexuality together

contd. from page 2

seemed to have lost out on our earlier insights. While we conceded that there are differences *within* the category of women itself – differences of race, of sexual identity, of culture and ethnicity, of class, what remained unexamined were the terms of identifying oneself as woman, which also leads to the question: what is woman? We have arrived at this answer by presuming woman's difference from man. But then what is the status of this (sexual) difference: is it ontologically foundational or culturally imposed? Is it determined by difference in bodies or is the different experience of embodiment itself determined by a domain of cultural meanings? How do we define woman or for that matter man? The category of anatomical sex as defining woman, no longer stands immutable and this was well demonstrated through the debates that emerged around the participation of transsexual and transgender people in the just concluded conference. Such questions remained unexplored throughout the four days of the conference ... in all sessions.

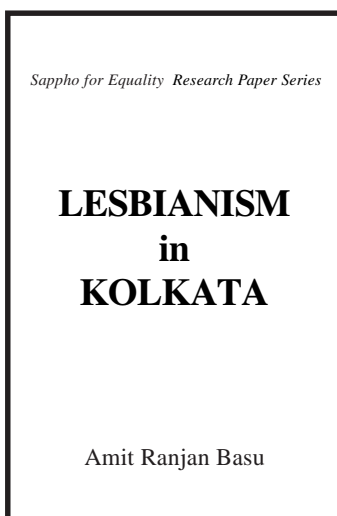
Feminism as a theory to analyze and resist women's oppression is not the name of a war against men. Feminism is a way of understanding the totality of life, including that of men. Men and women do not share a relation of oppression akin to that shared

between, say, the bourgeois and the proletariat or the upper caste and the *dalits*. Men and women also share a relation of love and emotional bonding, which cannot be reduced to the strategic moves of a war, to be charted out in the secrecy of a barrack. Women coming to the conference do go back to their loved ones at home (many of them being biological male) unlike any other gathering where the enemy lines are more clearly drawn. While the desire to come to terms with one's life situations in the solitude of a safe space and build a movement of solidarity with like-minded/like-bodied people is appreciable, the tendency to constrict both solitude and solidarity in the unquestioned ghetto of biological sex is not desirable. The complexities of women's lived lives cannot be grasped without a proper understanding of the sex-gender process. The understanding of sex gender has to infuse the whole atmosphere of the women's movement and not be restricted to a single discussion room of the 'marginalized genders and sexualities'. The movement to make the world a better place to live in is not a war to be fought and won; it is a process of learning from both sides ... from above and below ... through a necessary challenging of the known, the familiar and the secure.

■ Ranjita - psychiatrist and active member of Sappho for Equality

The first research paper published by

*Sappho for Equality*



*This research documents the formation of Sappho, the first support group for Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Women in Kolkata and Eastern India by exploring the narratives of its founder members and constructing the context in which it emerged.*

‘স্বকণ্ঠে’ স্যাফোর মুখপত্র নয় বা ‘নারী সমকামিতা’র প্রচার পুস্তিকা নয়। আমরা চাই সমকামিতা নিয়ে চারপাশের এই চাপধরা নৈশব্দ ভেঙ্গে খান্ খান্ হয়ে যাক। নিষিদ্ধ ব্রাত্য বিষয় নিয়ে চলুক কথার পিঠে কথা — নানা কথা, জানা বা অজানা। অবশ্যই ‘স্যাফো’-র সঙ্গে সহমত তার একমাত্র শর্ত হতে পারে না। কখনও বা ‘স্যাফো’ও হয়ত একটু ভিন্ন মত পোষণ করে। আমরা স্থির জলে একটা ঢিল ফেলেছি মাত্র — তরঙ্গ উঠছে কি? প্রিয় পাঠক, আপনারাই সবথেকে ভালো বলতে পারেন, তাই না?

## ***New arrivals at Chetana Resource Centre***

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author(s)/ Editor(s)</b>	<b>Publisher</b>
A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Leter Work of Luce Irigaray	Penelope Deutscher	Cornell University Press USA (2002)
Bending The Landscape Fantasy	Nicola Griffith & Stephen Pagel	The overlook Press New York (2004)
Bisexuality	Angie Bowie	Pocket Essentials Great Britain (2002)
Born To Be Gay: A History of Homosexuality	William Naphy	Tempus (2004)
Effeminism: The Economy of Colonial Desire	Revathi Krishnaswamy	The University of Michigan Press (1998)
Fantasies of Femininity: Reframing The Boundaries of Sex	Jane M. Ussher	Rutgers University Press USA (1997)
Feminist Theory and the Body	Janet Price & Margrit Shildrick	Edinburgh University Press (1999)
Gendermaps: Social Constructionism, Feminism, and Sexosophical History	John Money	Continuum, New York (1995)
Gender On Planet Earth	Ann Oakley	The New Press New York (2002)
Great Mirrors Shattered: Homosexuality, Orientalism, and Japan	John Whittier Treat	Oxford University Press New York (1999)
Impossible Women: Lesbian Figures & American Literature	Valerie Rohy	Cornell University Press USA (2000)
Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions	Karla Jay & Joanne Glasgow	New York University Press (1990)
Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India	Maya Sharma	Yoda Press, New Delhi (2006)
Now That You Know: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Their Gay and Lesbian Children	Betty Fairchild & Nancy Hayward	A Harvest Book Harcourt, Inc. London (1998)
Out in the World: Gay & Lesbian Life from Buenos Aires to Bangkok	Neil Miller	Random House, New York (1992)
Passages of Pride: Lesbian & Gay Youth Come of Age	Kurt Chandler	Times Books USA (1995)
Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law	Nivedita Menon	Permanent Black Delhi (2004)
The Attack Queers: Liberal Society and the Gay Right	Richard Goldstein	Verso London (2002)
The Lesbian History Source Book	Alison Oram & Annmarie Turnbull	Routledge London (2001)
Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995	Reed Woodhouse	University of Massachusetts Press (1998)
Why Feminism?	Lynne Segal	Columbia University Press New York (1999)
Women's Friendship in Literature	Janet Todd	Columbia University Press New York (1980)
Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps	Shirley Ardener	Berg, New York (1997)
Streelinga (The Second Sex) Vol-1 & Vol-2 [Bengali]	Simone de Beauvoir Translated by Latika Guha.	Deepayan Kolkata (2001)
Stree Linga Nirmaan [Bengali]	Mallika Sengupta	Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Kolkata (1999)
Antahin Antarin Prashitavartika [Bengali]	Somnath Bandhoyapadhya	Papyrus Kolkata (2002)

