

A Critical Look at Indian Queer Sociology: novel approach.

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Abstract

This study makes an attempt to queer Indian sociology. Queering encompasses the viewpoints of individuals who do not conform or do not desire to adhere to the heterosexual or hetero-gender thinking, or both. Non-conformity to established gender and sexual norms in a particular culture has significant implications for non-conforming individuals, which can range from physical assault to various exclusions, stigma, and marginalisation. Since the early 1990s, activists in India have been mobilising against unfairness, stigma, and abuses suffered by the sexually marginalised. Popularly termed as the LGBTQI movement or movements of "sexual minorities," these mobilizations across South Asia have brought to light numerous unpleasant and hazardous trajectories that comprise the very existence of these sexually marginalised people.

Key words: LGBTQ, Erotic subjectivities, Sexually marginalised, Queer Sociology

Introduction

In India and South Asia, sociology has failed to recognise the problematic terrains of sexual minorities as worthy of study. The silence and disinterest of Indian sociologists on sexually marginalised topics leads for speculation regarding

the discipline's latent heterosexism and homophobia. As a result, I begin this article with Michael Burawoy's (2006) concepts of "private difficulties and public issues," a phrase derived from C.W. Mill's Sociological Imagination. Mills defines sociological imagination as the transformation of personal problems into public issues (emphasis added). Personal problems, as defined by Burawoy, are the individual experiences that arise from unemployment, sickness, poverty, and other life challenges. The sociological worldview broadens as sociologists continue to embrace and accommodate "unfamiliar" and "new" problems, as well as forge partnerships with dissident organisations involved in contesting various forms of authority and domination (ibid). Some of the most private of the "private issues," in my opinion, are the sexual and sensual elements of human existence, which are mostly ignored in sociological studies in India and South Asia. Sexual and personal life, according to Jeffery Weeks (1986), is socially organised and hence profoundly entangled in power relations. He emphasises that subordinate sexual categories and subjectivities are ascribed to artificial constraints on potentially radical desire play. Making the sufferings of various sexual subjectivities a public concern would thus necessitate addressing the reality that desire is socially organised as well as governed by governmental authority. Sociology and Sexuality In western Sociology, „sexuality“ as a field of study only emerged during the 1960s. Ken Plummer (2012) maintains that for the first hundred and fifty years of its existence, Sociology paid very little serious attention to the study of human sexualities. The development of a new and critical Sociology of sexualities began in 1960s and since then has been an emerging field (ibid). In Indian Sociology, feminism makes its visible presence in the late 1980s (Rege, 2003). It would be an exaggeration to argue, however, that gender has been fully mainstreamed in Sociology, though gender within Sociology has become a significant sub-field. This is reflected in optional courses on „women and society“ offered by a large number of universities and colleges along

with vast amount of research and publications in this area accumulating since the 1980s (Chaudhuri, 2011). As mainstream Sociology tends to ignore „gender“ as a serious concern, feminist Sociology in India fails to move beyond heterosexism. If feminist concepts and theories offer a radical critique of gender binary, it is pertinent to ask why does feminist pedagogy end up reproducing the same binary (of men and women)? Feminist sociologists and their pedagogical practices challenge the sex-role stereotypes and sexual division of labour and even goes on to disrupt the coherent articulation of sex, gender and desire. I quote here from V. Geetha's (2006) Gender which is a popular and widely circulated text. While explaining the concept of gender, her ideas come very close to queer critique of binary assumptions. Geetha (2006, pp. 14-15) writes: [T]here are many young men who feel uncomfortable having to prove, insistently and unhappily, that they are macho. These men probably dislike fast bikes, do not want to tease girls, nor do they feel that world is theirs to appropriate and own. Such young men are bound to feel uneasy with the shadowy ideal of a powerful and authoritative masculinity that looms large over them...We need to ask ourselves whether there is anything „normal“ about our world being arranged this way, and if there are other ways of arranging it. Geetha (2007) also touches upon „compulsory heterosexuality“ in her small but brilliantly written volume on „patriarchy“. She quotes Chayanika Shah, a queer feminist who writes – „is compulsory heterosexuality only about controlling desire or is it about dictating that the world can have only two kinds of people – women and men“ (ibid, p. 197). Despite such awareness of sexuality as a significant issue and dismantling sexual roles and attributes based on stereotypes, feminist pedagogy and praxis in general and feminist Sociology in particular, do not stretch sexuality beyond an initial explication of a „sex-gender“ binary. Feminist sociologists put their anti-binarism agenda to rest after some initial ritualistic discussion while dealing with the problem of „sex and gender“. In the remaining part of the curriculum, gender becomes synonymous with women and the latter emerge as compulsorily heterosexual. Normative heterosexuality thereby circulates within the surface of feminist Sociology (Ingraham, 1994). Ken Plummer (1994) attributes this omission to what he calls as the unfortunate tendency to conflate gender and sexuality. So, Sociology in India and South Asia is marked by an absence of „sexuality“ as a separate sub-field and even the engendered Sociology recognises only men and women as legitimate subjects. The presence of gender identities beyond heterosexual binary is rendered invisible. Studies that highlight power and dominance exercised in regulating „erotic“ aspects of human life are not generally considered as sociological subject matter even within feminist Sociology.

In Defense of the terms ‘Queer’ and ‘Queering’

Queering is the process of reversing and destabilising heterosexuality as a norm (Nayar, 2010). Before I embark on queering Indian and South Asian sociologies by foregrounding the experiences of sexually marginalised subjects, I speak in defense of the term „queer“. In non-western contexts, it might be easier to dismiss a term if it is construed as „western import“. By using the term „queer“, I highlight the absence of any „pure“ indigenous term to describe and capture the powerlessness as well as the subversive potentials of non-heterosexual erotic subjects in South Asia or in the non-western contexts. The term „queer“ stands as an umbrella term to include both who are closeted and who are public about their non-heterosexual inclinations; to those who prefer to label themselves and the ones who choose to reject labeling or are unable to choose a label and name themselves (Narain & Bhan, 2005). Queer as a political term is opposed to all kinds of hierarchies and sexual violence based on stigma, and consequent discriminations. Queer includes activism and protest through art, literature, academic criticism and is inclined to forge alliance with any counter-hegemonic project (Nayar, 2010). To recapitulate, queer as an identity includes those who openly wear sexual identities like lesbian, gay,

bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and those who use indigenous terms like hijra, kothi, panthis to describe themselves. In addition to this, there are regional identities of sexual nonconformity, such as jogappa and jogtas in northern Karnataka and Maharashtra or the shivshaktis and ganacharis in parts of South India who are real and potential participants in „queer azadi“ (Narain & Bhan, 2005; Pande, 2004; Menon, 2007). While using the word „queer“ and „queering“ I wish to draw the attention of the readers towards the fact that as a political and emancipatory term, „queer“ loses its radical potentials when it takes a purely cultural turn and tends to neglect the pervasive impact of political economy. By cultural turn I mean those forms of queer protest which take place through art, avant-garde experimentations and identity politics without incorporating material conditions of life entrapping subaltern sexual subjects like hijras and poor working class „lesbians“ (Sharma, 2006). Distanced from both larger issues of political economy as well as from specific issues of class, it is closely aligned to the neo-liberal celebration of individual consumption and pleasure. In this sense, life style performance of sexuality seeks to create a fetish for freedom without radically altering the hegemonic social and sexual order. In this context, the „success“ of the queer political movement also coincides with the market’s „celebration“ of sexual diversity with specific products and specific avenues of queer entertainment and queer pleasure in restaurants, pubs, clubs, parties and exclusive queer tourism. It seems pertinent here to discuss the main ideas of Rosemary Hennessy (2000) wherein she looks at the role of „cultural ideology“ that displaces, condenses and masks the basic inequality of capitalism. She attempts to demonstrate how the urban gay culture of the western middle classes as well as the „performative theories of sex“ of Judith

Butler engage with destabilising the heteronormative through cultural performances while leaving aside questions of class and material inequality within queer communities. In fostering „consumptive pleasure“, neo-liberalism replaces critical (sexual) citizenship with shopping malls (ibid). She mentions the interpretation of sexuality exclusively in terms of „discourse“, „performance“, „difference“ and „lifestyle“ as disrupting heteronormativity inflected from issues of political economy. Sexuality becomes a fascinating field in cultural studies where interpretation and analysis of culture is severed from fundamental structures of capitalism. In the western context, Danae Clark (1991) observes that the intensified marketing of lesbian images is less indicative of growing acceptance of homosexuality than of „capitalist appropriation of gay „styles“. Ashley Tellis (2012) argues that neo liberal economy has turned „queers into entrepreneurial and consumptive citizens who play by the rules of state market nexus“.

Heteronormativity of Caste

It is rare to find any literature or empirical study linking non-heterosexual sexualities and caste. Nivedita Menon’s (2007) volume on Sexualities does contain a section on „caste and sexuality“ but it does not touch upon caste beyond the realm of heterosexuality, despite the fact that majority of the essays in the book are concerned with queer issues. Tellis’s (2012) deconstructionist reading of queer movement also points towards the absence of analysis from the viewpoint of caste but he fails to move beyond this broad recognition. It is my understanding that caste as an institution is based on endogamy and hence predisposed to heterosexual parturition. In this sense, caste would always reinforce heterosexism; queer perspectives therefore have a solid reason to engage with and enrich the critique of caste and patriarchy by foregrounding the exclusions and stigmas against non-heterosexual subjects inherent in the system of caste. Though dalit perspectives challenge the notions of „purity“, „untouchability“ and „material“

dimensions of caste, they too have failed to accommodate the voices of „sexual outcastes“. My ongoing study among the kothis – a „feminised masculinity“ – in small towns of western India reveal that, not just among „upper“ castes but, even among the subaltern caste groups these „feminised“ men are subjected to exclusion and violence in their everyday life. Dalit families in most cases are hardly any less coercive to their non-heterosexual members; the latter have to negotiate their existence within their family and community life by ensuring a regular supply of cash and everyday performance of domestic labour (Kumar, 2007, 2009). When the coercion becomes too oppressive, the kothis migrate to metropolitan city where they find no other option but to take on a hijra identity and sustain themselves primarily through sex work (ibid). It shows that sexually reproducing bodies within the heterosexual binary are as important to dalit groups as they are to the upper castes. The supposedly „non-heterosexual bodies“ are barely accepted within lower caste families. Narrative of a dalit non-heterosexual youth from rural India demonstrates the inadequacies of both dalit and feminist sociologies to capture the entrapments and exclusions on account of their non-heterosexual „erotic desire“i . „A“ from rural India narrates „his“ story of belonging to a „low caste“ family and trying to negotiate a non-heterosexual existence in the village. He begins his story with the issue of spatial segregation of caste settlements in his village. He is addressed by his caste name, chambhar by an upper caste landlord and by his own principal in the school – the latter himself being dalit! „A“ has experienced sexual violence which he finds difficult to articulate; he has been raped and sexually assaulted. His fault – possession of a sexually non-coherent self – his male anatomical sex and his masculine gender are seen as a mismatch to his same-sex erotic desire. His gestures do not correspond to his masculine gender and he fails to conform to local practices of heterosexuality. He cannot look for community support when his body is violated unlike a woman of his (dalit) community. Dalit women are oppressed but they are incorporated within family and community life. This is because „Dalit“ as a community cannot reproduce itself without harnessing the „reproductive power“ of their women. The community, however, can survive without „non-reproducing bodies“ of its „faggots“ and hence treats it natural to dispense of with those persons who fail to show a coherent articulation of sex, gender and desire. He fears being branded as gandu (faggot) and prefers silence to retain his existence within his family and community. Dalits as a group can organise against caste and state power; dalit women mobilise against dalit patriarchy and Brahminical feminism (Rege, 2004) but „dalit faggots“ cannot appeal for justice within their own community or dare to garner community support. Their demand would carry stigma, and, justice from this perspective would not convince the (heteronormative) community. The upper-caste queer in rural and semi-urban spaces are invisibilised. Gay, lesbian and bi-sexual identities are mostly articulated in metropolitan spaces. Probably, respectability articulated through upper-caste norms and the lack of anonymity in rural and semi-urban spaces invisibilises upper caste homosexually inclined persons. In certain senses, metropolitan cities provide anonymity and „individual“ space; thereby creating conditions for certain westernised queer identities to emerge. This has been facilitated by diasporic connections of South Asian queers along with NGO-led initiatives towards eliminating AIDS/HIV related stigma since the early 1990s (Bhaskaran, 2004; Kole, 2007). Mr. D from a metropolitan city and a member of a social networking of queer online-offline community surmises that majority of the members of the queer networking group are Brahmin and upper-castes which could be deciphered from the surnames of the members; the members of this group discuss „Stonewall Riots“ as a trigger for modern gay movement in the US, safe sex, gay erotica, queer films and organise theme parties and picnics. It is pertinent to ask – why do the subaltern queers remain unaware of Stonewall riots? Do the urban elite queers aesthetically appropriate Stonewall while subaltern working class homoerotic

subjects, who might also belong to lower castes, generally fail to associate with Stonewall, gay film festivals, erotica and gay art?

Social Movement, Sociology and Queer Movement

In this part, I argue that Indian Sociology should include the queer movement within its inventory of social movements. It may be regarded as one of the „new social movements“ which inter alia aims at autonomy, plurality and difference, individual and community freedom. Rajendra Singh (2001) writes that the nature of New Social Movements (NSMs) is expressed not so much in socio-political as in socio-cultural domains. Singh (ibid) highlights the co-existence of pre- and post-modernity and certain post-modern struggles within contemporary Indian society. Under the latter set of conditions, body, sexuality, health and gender identity have become very crucial. The site of NSMs is generally transnational; the field of their action, strategy and mode of mobilisation is global. Despite the broad and universalised social base of actors, there is an impression that participants in NSMs generally belong to the „new middle class“ which is considerably valid in case of sexuality-based identity politics in India and elsewhere. But for a critical Sociology as well as for critical sexuality studies we need to interrogate the sexuality movement from the viewpoint of subaltern sexual groups like hijras and kothis, lower middle class homosexually inclined persons and sometimes also heterosexually married gay persons (Rao & Sharma, 2009) who are not so privileged to participate in identity politics. The working class „lesbians“ who are the subject of Maya Sharma’s (2006) illuminating book and many transmen whose experiences are yet to be incorporated in movements for sexual freedom need inclusion and representation. Queer movement in India has taken up the issues of AIDS and human rights, decriminalisation of sodomy law, issues of transgender and other subordinate sexual identities including the problems of women-in-prostitution. Blackmail and violence of the sexually marginalised have prominently figured in these mobilisations. Like any other social movement, queer movement has a history in India (Vanita & Kidwai 2008; Bahskaran, 2004; Kole, 2007). The movement has produced a large body of documents on LGBT issues, documentary films on sexual minorities, academic writings; it has institutionalised, for example, Summer Institute in Sexuality organised jointly every year by CREA and TARSHI – Delhi based NGOs working on sexual rights and reproductive health issues. Some metropolitan universities have seen the emergence of Queer Study Circle and Queer Collectives (like Anjuman in JNU); parallel to Dalit autobiographies there exist hijra autobiographies (Revathi, 2010; Vidya, 2013) narrating the violence and dehumanisation of a very different nature; there are gay poetry, gay fictions, gay short stories redefining romantic love and sexual desire; LGBT magazines both online and offline such as „Pink Pages“, initiating the readers into the world of gay consumerism and cultural politics of sexuality by providing the readers a sense of „collective pan-Indian gay self“. NGOs working with „sexual minorities“ have created activist manuals and have offered training programmes for outreach workers to work with real and potential victims of HIV/AIDS and sexual minorities. A social work professional has written on community work with „Men who have Sex with Men (MSM)“ (Joseph, 2005). The presence of a large number of civil society organisations working among MSMs and sexual minorities assisted through global funding continue the network of queer communities, despite a recent slowdown in international funding. Autonomous groups such as LABIA, PRISM and Nigah Media Collective have also sprung up which keep away from donor loop and articulate radical sexual politics with an awareness of how funding

influences the quality of politics. Institutionalisation of courses on sexuality particularly in English literature at Pune University and the University of Hyderabad, Tata Institute of Social Sciences as well as Ashoka University, Delhi is in no way insignificant. Exhibition of queer art and queer erotica, of course, classy and counter heteronormative, are no more „uncommon“ and „odd“ among activist elites and intellectuals in contemporary urban metropolitan India (Tondon, 2012). „Queer Ink“ is an exclusive publishing and marketing agency on LGBT literature located in Mumbai. Skits and soliloquies on „coming out“ and „living as queer/s“, NGO drop-in centers for MSMs, queer film festivals, pride marches, social networking and cruising sites within cyberspace are recurring features of urban gay life in globalising India.

Globalisation: ‘Liberation’, Governance and Queer Consumerism

It’s the Church creeping into gay bedroom. Worse, it is consumerism. Thou shalt have babies who consume goods. Though shalt allow yourself to be consumed by consumerism. Though shalt not abandon the path of glorious consumerism. Though shalt never be nonbourgeois. If you are a proletarian gay you deserve to perish with the straight proles...” (Merchant, 2009, p. 7) Globalisation has become an integral element in the sociological imagination. Sociologists in India are not lagging behind in analysing the impact of globalisation on different aspects of social life. However, they are rather indifferent towards examining how globalisation affects „intimate life“. Research has shown that sex is the most searched/queried term and topic on internet search engines: we have entered the era of cyber flirting and cybersex (Nayar, 2012). Here I discuss, albeit briefly, AIDS/HIV and global funding and the growing gay consumerism in India. LGBT movement in India has coincided with the liberalisation of the economy; the funding of AIDS/HIV related projects and injecting the language of sexual rights through NGOs have been made possible through the World Bank, McArthur Foundation, Bill Gates International, Packard Foundation, Pathfinder International, Naz Foundation International and many other International funding organisations (Kole, 2007). Kole (ibid) brings out several interesting developments in sexuality movement in globalising India. He writes that AIDS discourse largely produced India as „sexually repressed“ and „sexually tabooed“ society. Thus, to be eligible for getting funds, say from McArthur Foundation or Bill Gates Foundation, one must promote sexual rights, and work with marginalised communities such as queer, sex workers and drug users. Availability of funds on HIV/AIDS changed the agenda of many NGOs who gave up working on other developmental issues and shifted to HIV/ AIDS and MSM. This also resulted in exaggerating the incidence of HIV/ AIDS in India. If global funding provided the framework and language for the articulation of rights for sexual minorities, the expanding global market did find gays as potential consumers of sexual pleasure. Market in sex surfaces on cyberspace and is commercialising gay sexuality in India and other parts South Asia. India has witnessed queer consumerism which has intensified after 2009 judgment of Delhi High Court. An IBN live post on internet recently mentions – „India is becoming more popular with gay travelers since the Delhi High Court decriminalised sexuality in 2009... the tour packages will often include gay nightlife or interactions with local gay business people... The biggest difference between normal and gay friendly tour operators according to Bhuwan Mehta of Pink Escapes, is “Pink tour operators can anticipate the requirement of gay travelers better, compared to normal tour operators”.” (Retrieved on 22 November 2012 from <http://ibnlive-in-com/news/pinktourism>). It is also worth mentioning that Delhi hosted South Asia’s first Gay Tourism conference in November 2011. Based on some LGBT online magazines and internet resources I list out certain developments towards the commercialisation of gay sexuality in India and many parts of South Asia. The online magazines – „Gaylaxy“ and „Pink Pages“ take the readers to the world of gay dating, scientific breakthroughs about producing babies outside

heterosexual intercourse, travel, cultures of sexuality, gay friendly tourism, national and international events and growing significance of „pink money“ in Asia. Cyberspace is also a cruising site where people seek partners and sexual service providers advertise their services.

Conclusion

To conclude, Indian Sociology should consider heterosexism as a form of power. It subjugates non-conforming „erotic subjectivities“. By bringing „multiple erotic subjectivities“ into disciplinary practices, Sociology not only compensates for the „information deficit“ (Mishra & Chandirmani, 2005) on the issue but can have a practical impact on individual lives. Dalit and feminist perspectives have enriched Indian Sociology but the trauma of a dalit subject whose erotic subjectivity does not conform to heterosexual binary cannot be captured and described either through dalit or feminist sociologies. I end with a humble submission that every sociologist in India who considers „social suffering“ and „marginalisation“ as issues of sociological engagement must read *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi written originally in Tamil and translated by V. Geetha in English. This autobiography by a person marginalised by class, sexuality and gender poses many questions to a discipline committed to unravel power, domination, oppression and resistance. Another dalit transgender, Vidya brings in deeper insights from her own life documented in her autobiography, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (2014) which could be a useful resource in the project of revolutionising epistemology and pedagogy in Sociology.

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