

Exploring South Asian Masculinities

Introductory Essay on Sexuality and Masculinities

-by Prof. Sanjay Srivastava

'Sexuality'? No Such Thing!

Introduction

The title of this brief essay is meant to suggest that the field known as 'sexuality' – whether as an area of study or as a set of ideas people have about their intimate lives – is too easily detached from the social contexts where it belongs and presented as something of itself. In other words, there is a tendency to view our sexual lives as dictated by its own peculiar rules that:

- a) are biologically derived
- b) have been historically stable (ie. the same since the 'dawn of time')
- c) are 'essentially' about our 'private' lives, and,
- d) are 'basically' the same across different cultures.

The 'No Such Thing!' of the title is intended to emphasize that 'sexuality' can not be understood on 'its own terms'. Further, also that we can not meaningfully begin to deploy it for whatever purposes we have in mind – activist, scholarship, agit-prop, etc. – until we realize that it is nothing but an empty vessel, filling up with a diversity of meanings, beliefs and actions depending on historical, social and cultural contexts. Hence, we can only productively engage with this topic through understanding the different contexts which influence the making of sexuality (or, more accurately, 'sexualities'), rather than insist that it constitutes a world-unto-itself.

A significant consequence of thinking that sexuality is a world-unto-itself has been that it tends to be simultaneously thought of as a very narrowly confined domain that has nothing to do with, say, politics and economics, as well as something that is of very general significance that is absolutely fundamental to the way we are and the very 'truth' of our being. We tend to both inflate its significance and downplay its role as a social field through treating it as a private 'thing'. So, if you're a bad cook, it's a minor blemish, but being bad at sex is seen as both an ontological and metaphysical crisis which requires major intervention. It is ironic that Sigmund Freud, whose writings were fundamental to providing new – non-biological – directions in the study of sexuality in the West, was, nevertheless, a believer in sexuality-as-a-biological drive theory. Despite literary, historical, artistic and other evidence that suggests that sexuality – both its expression and control – is fundamentally linked to contexts such as class, religion, wealth, and, gender norms, we nevertheless tend to de-link it from these social realities. If any thing, we are inclined to think of these aspects as incidental, choosing to believe that 'underneath it all' there lurks a fundamentally fixed essence – and a drive – we can identify as sexuality.

[So, the question is: Is there such a thing called 'sexuality'? Or, is it a knot made up of

the most diverse contexts of social and cultural life, registering changes in them? European theorists of the topic such as Michel Foucault suggest that 'sexuality' as a clearly demarcated field of discussion comes about during the early 18th century through a combination of medical, legal, educational and other discourses. This leads to the emergence of different categories of 'sexual beings' (the homosexual, the heterosexual, the sexualized woman, the sexually awakened child, the reproductive family, the 'pervert', etc.). Soon after, it is suggested, sexuality becomes focused on the family. That is to say, an entire gamut of experts (doctors, psychiatrists, priests...) concentrated their attention on the family, advising against the perils of 'bad' sexuality and ensuring its 'good health'. So, the family was both 'sexualized' and acted as an agent of sexualization. That is, it became the benchmark for topics such as 'good' and 'bad' sexuality, and 'healthy' sexual behaviour. According to this line of thinking, then, sexuality became a very important topic of discussion, rather than being banned from being discussed (or, repressed) as is commonly thought. 'Good' sexuality within the family— able to produce a suitable labour force – then became part of the development of capitalism].

Biology and Sexuality

'Sexuality' is one of those areas of study – perhaps even more than other areas of culture – where any degree of methodological precision is impossible to posit. This perspective differs from that shared by sexologists and other 'scientists'. It is a consequence of re-thinking the truth-of-our-sexuality perspective as well as the biologism that has historically afflicted sexuality studies. The former suggests a) sexual behaviour ought to be judged according to certain norms; and, b) there is an underlying 'truth' about our sexual lives that we simply must understand ('the gay gene explains homosexuality', 'sexual orientation is a fixed trait', 'the perfect orgasm', etc). Biologism in the study of sexuality is connected to the view that sexuality can be explained by recourse to a set of unchanging bodily essences and drives. Hence, just as we tend to think that our genders are biologically determined, so too we assume that our sexual lives unfold according to an 'inner' biological template. This, in turn, connects to two other ideas. Firstly, we think in terms of 'expressing' our sexuality as if it is an essence that simply appears through its own natural logic; another point of view would be to say that we enact our sexual selves, that is, it is learnt behaviour. And, secondly, we too easily assume that 'underneath our visible differences such as class and status, we harbour the same sexual 'drive'. Hence the commonly expressed sentiment that we should love people for their 'inner' selves.

Thinking about sexuality in another context – one that is just as susceptible to the 'inner drive' discussion – Jeffrey Weeks points out that 'The real problem does not lie in whether homosexuality is inborn or learned. It lies instead in the question: what are the meanings this particular culture gives to homosexual behavior, however, it may be caused, and what are the effects of those meanings on the ways in which individuals organize their sexual lives'. This is an excellent way of thinking about the broader field of sexualities itself

But what about the body?

There is, nevertheless, an irreducibility of the body that must be accounted for: our bodies are indispensable to how we 'present' ourselves to the world. How then to understand the role of biology in our (sexual) lives? One way of dealing with the issues is to suggest that biological facts are 'precondition' and 'potentialities', always in dialogue with cultural processes. Hence, we could say, biology does not 'cause human behaviour' but works alongside cultural and social forces to effect change.

That is to say, the unfolding of human behaviour occurs in contexts that are simultaneously cultural and biological, but that the two should not be regarded as 'the same thing'. Sexual behaviour is best understood as a process of learning to be human. Hence, if we seek to influence sexual behaviour, we must first begin by thinking of it as a social process, rather than natural behaviour. Precisely because sexuality is learnt behaviour, it differs across different times and different cultures. Hence, there is no universal category of the 'sexual' that holds true across all times and across all cultures. What is erotic in one culture (filed teeth, say) might not be regarded as such in another. This way of thinking about the topic also avoids thinking in terms of norms: that one particular context of sexual preference, behaviour, and desire is better than another. Finally in this context, the biological and the cultural can be brought together – simultaneously as we viewed as separate 'things' – by thinking of sexuality as the relationship between human beings, rather than simply as specific acts. The experiences of pleasure and pain that gather around sexuality are social experiences.

Sexuality and 'identity'

Sexual identities are simultaneously historical and contingent. That is to say, they have an unstable nature that is influenced by social and cultural circumstances. Further, there is no necessary link between sexual practice and sexual identity. So, in many non-western countries non-heterosexual behaviour does not necessarily lead to an adoption of a 'gay' identity. However, while we may say that sexual identities are fictions – ie. invented and fluid – they can also serve the very real role of acting as points of resistance and support. This is most obviously true in the case of, say, homosexuality. In the West, for example, the 'construction' of a gay community has been central to responses to HIV and AIDS. Similarly, the emergence of gay groups in non-western countries has served to intervene in and guide, among other things, debates around 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Additionally, such groups have also intervened in debates about other kinds of norms formulated by the post-colonial nations state. These include those that have to do with ideas of 'authentic' Indian (African etc.) cultures that are now being destroyed by 'westernization'. Writers and activists linked to Gay, Lesbian, and Queer movements in non-western countries have played an important role in re-thinking notions of the 'ideal' family, and normative gender identities.

Anthropologists have for long recognized the shifting nature of identities. Consider the case of the 'female husband' in many African societies, where:

...an infertile woman or a woman who had no sons herself married a younger woman who would then bear sons for her husband in the name of the female-husband. The female-husband could then be wife to her husband and mother to their children, and husband to her wife and father to the children of that wife. ...the woman would exist the gender conduct thought proper for her role, as either wife/mother, or husband/father.

Similarly, public debates about sexual identities open up questions of sexual identities, pointing to ways in which they are both fluid and open to change, rather than being a fixed and 'inalienable attribute of the person concerned'

There is a persistent debate among scholars and activists in many non-western countries regarding Lesbian, Gay and Queer identities that centres around the idea that these are 'western' identities and not really relevant in the context of non-heterosexual behaviour in non-western countries. This is a significant discussion debate for at least three reasons: 1) that cultural differences are important to consider;

and, 2) that non-heterosexual behaviour has also been a 'normal' aspect of, say, Indian culture; and, 3) sexual identities are also class identities, in as much gay and lesbian in India might be terms that circulate in relatively privileged contexts. Notwithstanding this, many would argue that gay, lesbian and queer identities are significant aspects of contemporary sexual politics within non-western countries and should be given the same attention as 'indigenous' categories (whatever they might be); after all, we don't refuse to travel in trains (or use electricity) because they came from the West.

Non-western sexualities

There is too often a tendency to think of contemporary Indian sexual cultures countries as having some kind of direct link to an 'Classical Indian Love Texts' such as Vatsayana's Kama Sutra and Kalyanamalla's Ananga Ranga. Any such link is highly tenuous: contemporary sexual cultures are formed in the crucible of a variety of nationalist politics and transnational flows, global sexual-health programmes, the effects of new consumer cultures, changing patterns of work and leisure among young women, and the effects of different media flows. Neither have ideas around sexuality in non-western countries been as stable as is sometimes assumed in NGO narratives that seek to account for 'local' practices in global sexual health campaigns. It may, in fact, be quite impossible to find a 'purely' indigenous sexuality that can be contrasted with a western one: both have been formed through interaction with each other. 'Western' and 'non-western' may not capture that history where European sexuality has been made through the image of the non-European 'primitive', or, where the postcolonial nation-state has built upon this discourse in order to produce its own 'authentic' culture. The substantial portion of sexual cultures in the non-western world is made out of these sorts of hybrid transactions. The search for an 'authentic' Indian (etc.) sexual culture is, however, worth thinking about. What anxieties does it express?

VIOLENCE AND MASCULINITY

-by Dr. Deepak Mehta

To define violence is far less relevant than trying to adequately conceptualize what might be seen as violent acts. Yet, difficult though an analysis may be, we need to arrive at a minimum delineation of the kind of violence under consideration rather than assume that violence is merely a self-evident category of behavior. This note begins with the assumption that violent acts are not mere pointers to a certain kind of behavior, whether such behavior be fundamental to cultural practice and competence, but also indices of how meaning is generated, maintained and destroyed. The second assumption is that moral rectitude in condemning acts of violence cannot stand in for professional commitment in trying to understand its procedures and effects. Finally, whether violence should be theorized, or should be formulated as a narrative of suffering is left open-ended. This note starts with the point of view that in the analysis of violence, the category of masculinity establishes crucial links between the national and the local, the spectacular and the everyday, the present and the future. The term gender itself has undergone significant revisions in recent times. One of the most important is the placing of men within its frame(s) - showing how they themselves act as gendered beings across a range of social practices. As far as the analysis of violence is concerned, the linking of masculinity to gender highlights certain aspects of violence that would otherwise remain obscure.

Rather than affirm a typology that separates public and collective violence from domestic and private assault, this note suggests that the link between violence and masculinity in India is better understood in terms of three distinct but overlapping discursive registers. What is common to all of them is an elaboration of the figure of the enemy.

1) Nation State and Violence: The first genre that 'emplaces' violence is that of external war, nationalist vigilance and closure and a state of emergency. In the relationship between trans-border violence and the law we find the embodiment of the figure of the terrorist, more often a young adult male than a woman. The discourse of violence here is concerned mainly with uncovering the motivations and self-understandings of terrorists. The corresponding and perhaps symmetrical discourse of state torture remains muted. The terrorist comes in many forms, but his main threat and force lies in his anonymity and his being a stranger – someone who has entered the country today to destroy its tomorrow. The cult of death (suicide bombing, jihadi violence) seems to be the hallmark of an agonistic masculinity. A competing, but not as yet fully developed discourse is provided by the figure of the Naxalite (the term popularly used in India for maoist militants). If the Jihadi is charged with a messianic sensibility, the Naxal is his secular riposte, charged with exterminating the pervasive signs of a corrupt faith. Rather than being a stranger, the Naxal is homegrown and emerges from local communities. The responses to such violence, through emergency procedures in law, foreground the claim that the reply to terror – both Jihadi and Naxal – resembles a state of exception, where transgression and law cannot anymore be distinguished. The state response to terror also highlights a contract between the male citizen and the state. In the defence of the state the (male) citizen agrees to have his body altered for otherwise the consent to kill and to die cannot be guaranteed. In contrast to an agonistic masculinity, we find the discourse of patriotism and heroic virtue being attached to the male body, where sacrificial violence is deployed for the defence of the nation.

2) Civil Violence and Public Order: A ubiquitous form of civil violence in India has been framed under the term 'communal riot', a term that conceals as much as it reveals.

The riot refers, of course, to Hindu-Muslim violence in India, and is presented as a breakdown of law and order. Scholarly writing shows the connections of the riot with the machinations of political parties, the various structures of criminality that nourish it and its costs on the laboring poor. We do not, as yet, have adequate understanding on how the riot affects men, given the fact that most of the documented perpetrators and victims of violence are men. From available reports, there is little doubt that forms of sexualized humiliation of men accompany the riot. The castration of men and boys, stripping, simulated and forced homoerotic sex suggests that the enemy is evacuated of masculinity. Derogatory terms, such as *katua* and *landya*, are pointers in this direction. Second, the male body is annexed to the boundaries of the nation state. Certain bodies, circumcised for example, are thought to be the property of Pakistan and are constituted as external to the Indian nation. What is urgently required is a systematic comparison of the link of sexual humiliation with the project of masculine domination. It may be that the riot throws up the view that the phallus is the path to culture and that sexualized humiliation invites an intimacy with the forbidden. This upsets the conventional wisdom that women are the bearers of honor.

3) Domestic Violence and Intimacy: As an arena of refuge and nourishment, the home has long been celebrated as the sphere of intimacy. Recent research that focuses on women's experience of the domestic shows that the home is, far too frequently, a space of masculine domination. When the focus has been on eliciting the experiences of men, the home emerges as a site of masculine anxiety. This suggests that the home is a combination of plural domesticities. The high prevalence of wife beating, child abuse and female servant abuse across most regions of India shows that the home is often a space of terror. From the point of view of men's experiences, the home is sometimes seen as a zone of emasculation, given that the male head of the household is unable to provide for its material well-being. If from one point of view, masculine dominion over the home translates as wife beating, from another perspective, the home also becomes the site of inadequacies and frustrations. With increased awareness of domestic violence and its corrosive affects on public life, a variety of issues seem to have emerged. First, we find a conservative defence of the family which argues for minimal state intervention in one's intimate life. This defence often conceals men's privilege. Second, some feminists argue that the movement of state law into the domestic compromises relations of intimacy, relations that are far too complicated and individual for state law to resolve. In response, various community courts (*nari adalats*) have attempted to address such problems. In these instances, we find the emergence of a notion of masculinity that is posed as a relationship, rather than an essence.

The three registers outlined above are indications of how one may think through the relationship between masculinity and violence. What is common to them is, as I have suggested earlier, the figure of the enemy. Depending upon where the enemy is located, it seems to me that a number of affects accompany this figure. While fear and horror and sorrow and grief may be the accompanying affects associated with this figure, a masculine understanding of violence also throws up ludic aspects of the enemy. An understanding of the work of irony and sometimes the absence of remorse are fertile grounds for the constitution of masculinity and violence.

We look forward to your comments and an expansion as well as detailing of the registers presented here from different situations and understandings.

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Exploring South Asian Masculinities

Masculinities and Representations

-by Dr. Brinda Bose

Masculinities in/and Cinema

Arguably, masculinities are most clearly represented – or enacted, effected, affected – in cinema through (or in, or by) social, professional, personal, emotional and intellectual relationships that men (and sometimes women) conduct in their lives. Theorizing masculinities in cinema would therefore mean an assimilated understanding of how a man (or a woman) relates to the person s/he is acting upon/reacting to, in the context of gendered perceptions and expectations of a masculine behavioral response in a particular relationship as represented in the film(s). In the semiotics of visual narratives, masculinities are generally expected to correspond with certain tropes of behavior that the spectator can recognize and interpret as unsurprisingly masculine, whether it is aggression or violence or tenderness or passion in a specific situation. The subject would usually be said to exhibit masculinities when responding in such characteristic ways to encounters in relationships, that can be distinguished from what would be read as ‘feminine’ modes of response and behaviour. However, narratives of cinema, like all others perhaps, continually both affirm and interrogate established tropes of behaviour, making it difficult – if not impossible – to interpret genders rigidly, and making masculinities plural and dynamic.

This plasticity of masculinities (and, correspondingly, femininities) emerges from a set of multiple cultural logics that are employed in our reception of gendered visual narratives. Masculinities are gender-specific as well as culture-specific, and in their cultural specificities often challenge and overturn what we may consider established patterns of gender, which may be West-centric. Masculinities in South Asian cinema would therefore be read variously according to the cultural logics of the region it represents, through the logics of the individual spectator as well as through the logics of an universal register of masculinities, however notional and shifting that may be. Fredric Jameson says in his introduction to *Signatures of the Visible* ((Routledge 1992/Routledge Classics, 2007) that “the only way to think the visual, to get a handle on increasing, tendential, all-pervasive visibility as such, is to grasp its historical coming into being... history alone... can mimic the sharpening or the dissolution of the gaze” (p.2); certainly it may be fruitful to consider the representation of masculinities in South Asian cinema in correspondence with the evolution of the affects of masculinities in its various sociological contexts as well as the perception of it in a historical trajectory. Gender and its enactments are so dynamic that the only way, perhaps, to contend with it is to map the coordinates of change that it registers along its path – and the cinema may well provide a significant and engaging record of its travels and travails.

To begin with, we would have to frame some basic questions around what masculinities mean in South Asia, how they have been (and continue to be) represented in cinema and how such representations have been (and continue to be) read/understood/interpreted/interrogated by the cinematic spectator. Also, cinema has such a wide and penetrating influence that even those who are disinterested in its representations or its politics are still affected by its reach through their interactions, in their daily lives, with regular spectators of cinema. Masculinities – abstractions derived from behavioral aspects of the male sex – are most obviously represented on

screen through relationships that men have, mainly with other people but also with animals, nature, their houses, their cars, their sporting and leisure equipment, and their own selves, their bodies and their thoughts. Masculinities are interpreted through expectations of 'masculine' behaviour in these multiple relationships, which are based on a priori perceptions of gendered difference. What, however, are these expectations of masculinity derived from? In reading cinema, interpretations of gendered action/inaction are largely modeled on Western theoretical formulations regarding masculinities and femininities. However, while a fair proportion of gendered behaviour theory is universally understood, if not universally applicable, there can be little doubt that both the creation and the reception of gendered representations are culturally coded, and that these codes are so critical to anyone's comprehension of gendered behaviour that the representation would lose all its signifiatory power if its specific cultural logic of location, for example, were not to be apprehended.

Masculinities in and of themselves – prior to their visual representations – are an indeterminate mix of roles and role-playing: roles that are innate or inherited, and enactments that are learned, derived, adopted or adapted in congruence with the political, social and economic environment that the individual belongs to. Specific processes of socialization determine masculinities and femininities in a particular culture, and these often override, if not overturn, universally-accepted codes of the masculine and feminine. In South Asia, for example, such universal codes may be deliberately mocked or flouted in order to establish a geographical and political distinction with 'Western' paradigms. At a prior level of determinacy, in fact, it may be useful to problematize the very framework of gender difference which mostly collapses into the duality of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine'; Deborah Kerfoot has suggested that the adoption of the term 'masculine subject' enables us to avoid this trap, recognizing that both men and women can be masculine even though masculinity is conventionally considered to be a range of behaviours for men (*The Masculinities Reader*, 2001, 236). Masculinity then exists as a way of being. What, then, is this way of being, and how is it represented in visual narratives of gender? As said earlier, it is perhaps best recognized in/through representations of relationships. According to Stephen Whitehead in *Men and Masculinities* (Polity, 2002), 'There is a commonly held view in many societies that men "cannot do" relationships as effectively as women' (p. 156); this comment is of course related to notions of intimacy – particularly emotional – which is one of the key determinants of gendered behaviour and difference, and the one that most nearly cuts across cultural logics aspiring to an universal coding of sorts.

It has been inferred in Western theory from social interactions across race, class, age and location, that men and women have conflicting perspectives on the conducting of intimate relations - not necessarily sexual – since at the very basis there is a difference of both purpose and approach. The masculine subject prefers to control the dynamics of human interaction and therefore likes to be prepared for both its course of action and its outcome; the feminine subject finds spontaneity the most significant aspect of a close or intimate relationship and revels in the 'feel' of an immediate shared experience and the bonding that results from it. Masculinity, however, is threatened by spontaneity as it is precarious and destabilizing, which results in the masculine subject retreating into conventional behaviours like evading social encounters with women that are potentially uncomfortable. In relationships between men (again, not necessarily sexual), the West has traditionally valorised comradeship as the central paradigm of friendship, stressing the importance of loyalty and fellow-feeling rather than emotional intimacy. Comradeship is a form of friendship that may pass for intimacy (especially in situations like being together for long stretches of time in war or at sea), but if intimacy is marked by the possibility of self-disclosure – the

revealing of one's most private thoughts, fears and desires to another person – then comradeship, despite its demands of loyalty and concern, forecloses this aspect of the relationship by enforcing a certain distance through a curiously dispassionate bonhomie. Cross-sex friendships, on the other hand, that do not result in heterosexual couplings, are viewed as possible catalysts for social change since both must confront and work through conflicted perceptions of codes of intimacy.

Cinema works with and against established parameters of gendered behaviours in relationships; it is not difficult, for example, in the Western context, to interpret the actions of a particular masculine subject in a relationship as 'feminised' or 'homoerotic' in a narrative sequence if they are indicative of inviting emotional intimacy rather than rejecting it, as 'masculinity' demands. Replacing these paradigms with South Asian contexts complicates the picture, however. While South Asian masculinities do indeed generally adhere to certain universal codes of male aggression, taciturnity, and fear of spontaneous intimacy with females, male friendships in South Asia, for example, are often (mis)read as homosexual/homoerotic/homosocial because they are marked by a kind of closeness that would only be characteristic of homosexual relationships in Western codes of behaviour. In South Asian cultures, however, such intimacies do not often signify homosexuality, and traditionally acquired such affects partially because similar emotional intimacies were not possible with members of the opposite sex. The masculine subject would not even have realized that the bonding he enjoyed with a male friend could be interpreted as sexual, since he was not allowed to indulge in such intimacies with a female he might have desired sexually and/or emotionally. This is not to say that all male-male friendships in South Asia are devoid of homosexual intent or content, but to point out that the signifiers have always been more complex than might appear in a Western context, and would therefore need both knowledge and understanding of the multiple cultural logics being enacted in the visual narrative of gesture and speech to be correctly read. This reading is of course then further complicated by the spectatorial gaze, the register by which the effects and affects of masculinities in South Asian cinema are interpreted and understood.

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