(Hi)Stories of Desire

(Hi)stories of Desire situates questions of sexuality in the larger domain where they are conditioned by and, in turn, also condition historically and culturally produced landscapes of being, doing, and desiring. The volume draws upon multi-disciplinary frameworks of analysis – including history, anthropology, literary studies, queer studies, and psychoanalysis – to provide a pan-Indian account of the making of sexual cultures. Based on original research, the chapters foreground sexuality as a significant site for the making of regional, national, and personal modernities.

Sexuality research in India tends to oscillate between the binaries of Western meta theories and the valorization of the local which constitutes a response to the former. The chapters in this collection consciously seek to circumvent both these strands and, instead, explore region and locality as embedded in fluid and constantly mediated spaces, both within and beyond the 'West' and the 'East' binary. They also demonstrate the difficulty of prioritizing specific frameworks – 'self-discipline', 'bio-politics', 'heteronormativity' – in the study of sexuality in a society where the circulation of ideas regarding sexuality must pass through networks characterized by severe historical and social disjunctures.

This volume addresses the modern paradox where sexuality is assigned a central significance in human life and yet its study tends to remain unconnected from the political, religious, social and economic contexts that produce human subjectivity. It will be of interest to a wide range of readership, opening up the topic to complex yet accessible ways of understanding the culture of sexualities and the sexuality of culture.

Rajeev Kumaramkandath teaches at the Department of Sociology and Social Work at CHRIST (deemed to be) University, Bengaluru. He has published in areas of postcolonial histories of sexuality and on the question of clandestine sexual subjects. His research also explores the politics behind the death of languages and vernacular movements in South Asian contexts.

Sanjay Srivastava is Professor of Sociology at the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi. He has written and published widely on urban spatial politics, sexuality and culture, and modernity in India. His most recent publication is *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon* (2015).

(Hi)Stories of Desire

Sexualities and Culture in Modern India

Edited by
Rajeev Kumaramkandath
Sanjay Srivastava

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Contents

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Introduction

Sexuality and Sexualities*

Sanjay Srivastava and Rajeev Kumaramkandath

Introduction

The most significant recent development, a break with the past, in the study of sexual cultures has to do with the term 'culture' itself: that we think of sexuality (and sexualities) as having 'cultures'. Historically, both in academic and popular thinking, the term 'sexuality' most frequently elicited responses that have to do with biology. That is, whether as an area of study or as a set of ideas people have about their intimate lives, sexuality was too easily detached from the social contexts where it belongs and presented as something of itself. There is a strong tendency to view our sexual lives as dictated by their own peculiar rules that

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

Ironically, while, on the one hand, we think of sexuality as a world-unto-itself – such that it is regarded as a very narrowly confined domain that has nothing to do with, say, politics and economics, we also simultaneously think of it as something of very general significance that is absolutely fundamental to our being. We tend to both downplay its meanings as well as inflate its

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significance. So, for example, if one is a bad cook, it's a minor blemish, but being 'bad' at sex is seen as a major crisis which requires intervention (through seeking the help of 'sexologists', for example).

The sexuality-as-a-drive perspective which was, most famously, both problematized but also institutionalized by Sigmund Freud presents itself in the Indian context in peculiarly Indian ways. It was, for example, at the heart of many of the arguments that were made – and continue to be made – about the difference between Hindus and Muslims, those between 'tribal' and 'non-tribal' populations, and between the middle-class and poorer populations. So, with respect to the last point, the rise of sexology and the family planning movements are directly linked to the early-twentieth-century perception of the different sexual drives that supposedly characterized the educated and the uneducated (Ahluwalia 2013; Srivastava 2007). Sexology was intended to cater to the more evolved sexual desires of the middle classes, whereas family planning was directed towards controlling the uncontrollable drives of the poor, one that threatened nation-building.

European theorists, such as Michel Foucault (1990), have suggested that sexuality as a clearly demarcated field of study and debate emerges during the early eighteenth century through a combination of medical, legal, educational, and other discourses. This, in turn, led to the emergence of different categories of 'sexual beings' such as the homosexual, the heterosexual, the sexualized woman, the sexually awakened child, the reproductive family, the 'pervert', and so on. Soon after, Foucault suggests, sexuality became focused on the family and, hence, the processes of producing ideal workers and social subjects within capitalism. What is striking for the Indian case is the *lack* of a similar trajectory. This, we suggest, has to do with the multiplicity of public and private spheres and, hence, the obstructions in the way of any one strand of thinking about sexuality achieving hegemony. The essays in this collection demonstrate the difficulty of delimiting specific frameworks – 'self-discipline', 'bio-politics', and 'heteronormativity' – as frameworks for the study of sexuality in a society where the circulation of ideas regarding sexuality must pass through networks characterized by disjuncture.

This also allows us to reflect upon the perception that there are universal truths to sexuality that can be uncovered through methods of science, putatively providing precise insights. In this context, a significant strand in the study of sexualities seeks to move beyond this dominant perspective. This strand – one that can be found within this volume – is this: what is significant is not so much whether particular sexual behaviours are inborn or learned but, rather,

what are the historically and culturally specific meanings that gather around such behaviour (Weeks 2003). This allows us to avoid dangerous and sterile ideas about the 'gay gene' and why the transgender population should be treated with respect because of humans' 'natural' proclivities towards transgenderism. It avoids the pitfalls of – sometimes well meaning – scientism.

Anup Dhar, in this volume, shows how sexuality research in the Indian context situates subjectivities amid certain grand theoretical formulations, the ones we gestured earlier – the Foucauldian power-knowledge and the Freudian repressive hypothesis. One frequent manner in which the hold of metatheories – whose origins lie in Western contexts – is sought to be overcome is through valorizations of the 'local'. These, however, as Dhar argues, 'over-interpret and overemphasize the foreignness/Western-ness/recent-ness of the concept' (18). The limits and fallacies of returning to metatheories can, as he suggests, be countered through a 'prop roots' perspective that counters both rootless universalism and negating particularism. This is important in rethinking about the 'theoretical dogmas' that still guide our presumptions about the nature of Indian sexuality.

Sexuality in society

As the discussion indicates, this collection seeks to position sexuality in the messiness of the social, moving beyond the medicalized approaches to sexuality and those that derive from the quantitative sciences. This task has, of course, a genealogy, and we can immediately identify certain frameworks that have sought to capture the social and cultural complexity within which sexual cultures are located. The Marxist approach, for example, requires that we primarily view sexuality as a series of economic relations of domination and exploitation. So, Marxists would argue, the heterosexual family is a key site of support for capitalist relations of production in as much as it facilitates the seamless reproduction of a labour force that is socialized into not questioning social and economic inequalities. The overwhelming emphasis on the 'economic' within Marxist approaches does not, however, provide justice to the various other matrices of sexual cultures (how to account for non-heterosexual cultures, for example).

The psychoanalytic approach, derived from the pioneering writings of Sigmund Freud, is yet another thematic zone that several sexuality projects have usefully explored. The influence of psychoanalysis, and the 'repressive' hypothesis, in particular, has been massive and pervasive on

studies of sexuality (as Anup Dhar, discussed earlier, also points out). With its emphasis on the role of multiple levels of consciousness in the making of sexual selves, the psychoanalytic approach suggests the sexual behaviour and thought as mere 'surface' activities that mask deeper fears, anxieties, and desires. Notwithstanding its interest in exploring the influence of the social environment in the making of human sexuality, Freudian psychoanalysis nevertheless proceeds from the assumption that sexuality is 'fired' by deeply embedded biological drives. Thus, in a sense, this approach perpetually returns to the assumption that, as Foucault had pointed out, there is an essential truth behind it.

Feminist frameworks posit the historical subordination of women – and the analysis of historically and socially constructed power relations – as fundamental grounds for analysing sexuality. Feminism – not that it is a monolithic school of thought – has provided ground-breaking critiques of a wide range of contexts, including the family, legal frameworks, religious regulations, colonial and nationalist discourses, literary genres, as well as other intellectual paradigms such as Marxism and psychoanalysis. In a significant sense, the feminist approach cuts across all other analytical contexts, providing important ways of understanding the role of gendered power in the making of human relations.

Another approach is, of course, social constructivism. Here, sexuality is explored through a focus on its 'constructed' nature, that is, the different forms it takes according to the different social and historical circumstances. This approach moves away from notions of fixity and 'inner' drives towards ideas regarding constant flux. The approach has very often been criticized for downplaying the role of biology. However, it is also pertinent to think that biology is not apart from the social. Even the most 'innate' sexual desires have to be articulated in ways that are socially accepted. Despite the intense constructivist debate between essentialists and social constructionists–social construction approach has acquired a fair amount of acceptance and popularity among sexuality researchers in social sciences (Seidman 2015). This is because the biological (or essentialist) approach misses the dynamics of the 'local' and fails to account for the myriad ways through which it has come into existence. The historical, political, economic, and cultural milieus of the different locals are so diverse that they entail different languages and forms of sexuality. The diversity of these sexual cultures is clearly outside of the realm of biology. Another way of looking at it would be that biology always operates in tandem with social and cultural realities, a combination that produces different ways

of being. This way of positing the issues then bridges the gaps and avoids constituting 'biology' and 'culture' as totally unrelated realms, or biology as 'prior' to culture. It also serves to emphasize the fact that 'we become human only in human society' (Padgug 1989).

Anirban Das, in this volume, suggests that we need to address the interplay between the specificities and the generalities that structure the sexual 'in far more nuanced details than is done'. Using Bataille's reasoning of eroticism as beyond objective knowledge, Das locates sexual experience as springing from the deep interior self, the universality of which 'is rooted in, yet not reducible to, the ideologies active in the public domain' (30). This frame then effectively puts into crisis both, what Das calls, the historical (which includes the sociological and the ethnographic) and the ahistorical (the psychoanalytic and the philosophic) approaches to the extent they challenge the validity of objectifying the experience of the erotic. His reading of the two Bengali texts connects the textual with the conceptual, which takes it beyond both constructivism and empiricism. This is made possible because, as Das claims, 'the literary has also a privileged access to the singularity of the interior to which sexuality has a claim' (30).

Irrespective of the approaches, a significant aspect of the 'social' approach to sexuality has been the exploration of sites of gender and sexual subversion and the problematization of the sexual norm. Navaneetha Mokkil's contribution to the volume discusses a site of sexual subversion in the twenty-first-century Kerala in south India. The dual autobiographical project by a sex worker and activist, Nalini Jameela, articulates 'a negotiated, mediated process of producing a life narrative that had many stuttered beginnings' (40). The conscious shift to a political subjectivity *prima facie* involves addressing the medical, judicial, and the moral frames through which a sex worker is often positioned in statist discourses. In the sexual–cultural landscapes of the last two decades or so, sex workers' location has undergone two noticeable shifts: the terminological shift from the detested *veshya* (prostitute) to a more acceptable *laingika thozhilali* (sex worker); also, there is a shift in her position from the margins to the centre of statist discourses of health, particularly with the dawn of AIDS. However, the shifts and the increasing visibility do not necessarily make her vulnerability to social-statist violence any less intense. Amid this visibility/vulnerability paradigm, then, the sex worker has to adopt a 'recalcitrant' position in order to articulate her subject positions.

Historical and cultural specificity, as our contributors reiterate in different ways, is important for, among other things, to avoid biological reductionism

and static and universalized views of sexuality. However, it is equally significant that we avoid the trap of absolute difference. Approaches that seek to posit an *absolute* difference between 'Western' and non-Western concepts and identities are problematic in themselves. The long history of interaction between different cultures suggests that though the specificities of history and culture are important, we should also be mindful that contemporary identity politics is played out in *zones of interaction* that are characterized by ideas and behaviours from diverse sources, including the processes we now refer to as 'globalization'. So, '[r]ather than trying to rescue an image of a purely indigenous sexuality, distinct and untainted by "outside" Western influence, it is more useful to ask what kinds of interactions, connections and conflicts emerge in the …porous zones' (Pigg 2005: 54). It is these kinds of interactions that contributors to this volume significantly focus upon.

Histories of sexuality

In order to think about the social field within which sexual cultures are embedded, it is important to *historicize* sexuality. Ideas about sexuality – as about its relationship to gender – have developed through time in conjunction with a number of other factors. Within this context, we must think of how sexual cultures are located within fields of power. Thus, although we constantly talk about power and sexuality, relations between the two in specific times and spaces require investigation. Irrespective of the theoretical frames that structure research projects, history has become an indispensable register to talk about sexuality and sexual cultures. The chapters in this volume directly or indirectly refer to sexual histories in their respective contexts. Rajeev Kumaramkandath discusses mid-twentieth-century cultural debates over questions about the representation of desire, the birth of obscenity, and the question of representing non-heteronormativity in Malayalam literature. He discusses the ways in which the structuring of the *regional* space for cultural representation established the norms for cultural debates. The period of the mid-twentieth century as a cultural era is embedded in the erstwhile reform concerns (with its overt focus on sexual discipline) and the postcolonial euphoria over political freedom. The ensuing concerns over building the nation had a profound impact on the patterns of imagining the sexual in the space of literature. Thus, although the reform-centric language of sexual discipline was increasingly challenged in fledgling movements in literature – through portraying sexual and casteist transgressions which, otherwise, remained tabooed topics in literature – it still

effectively sidelined and made invisible the non-heteronormative subjects and practices. The space of debates, as Kumaramkandath points out, led to the formation of obscenity as a culturally embedded category that would operate through social consent and without the necessary involvement of the state agencies.

Akshaya Rath explores another historical register in his chapter on Kālā Pāni, the penal colony that the British created in the Andaman and Nicobar islands in the nineteenth century. Rath discusses the colonial homophobic registers which were central in its creation and administration. Projections of the colonies as filled with vice and 'unnatural' sexual practices were at the heart of the British colonial cultural enterprises in India. The penal colonies and the connected regulatory practices epitomized the Empire's preoccupation with 'uncontrolled' libido, unnatural vice, sexual diseases, conjugality, and work in the colonies. Filling a whole landscape with male convicts, transported from their home and familial locations, invoked the dangerous possibilities of uncontrolled sexual transgressions which most significantly, and most annoyingly for the colonial administrators, included practices of sodomy that was considered a crime against the crown. The 'repressive history of human copulation in Kālā Pāni' reveals the history of producing a sexual culture that not only suppressed the visibly queer but also helped the Empire gain its control over the ocean (81).

In all cultures, including the European, a wide variety of conceptions of gender and sexuality existed before the advent of the modern era. Many forms of expression – body appearance, gestures, voices, and so on – were seen to be part of maleness and femaleness, and a broad range of sexual behaviours was tolerated. Some theorists now argue for a strong connection between modernity and the emergence of norms around gender identities and sexual behaviour. Anthropologist Gilbert Herdt suggested that an exploration of the sexual culture of the Sambia of Papua New Guinea allows us to re-examine certain basic categories of modern Western thought that have gained dominance in our ways of thinking about sexualities. '[Hence] to understand Sambia sexual subjectivity, for instance, we have to deconstruct the meaning of 'homosexuality' as a Western category' (Herdt 1999: 16). Modernity undoubtedly produced new forms of hegemony, structures, and hierarchies that operate on and erase non-modern and/or the pre-modern elements. This is especially true in the realm of sexuality which has been – albeit much more intensively in the European context – a crucial site for the making of new subjects. The 'normalization' of sexuality, including identifying it as a distinct realm of thought and behaviour, is the most critical element in the formation of modernity's subjects.

We might then say that the diversity of sexual cultures is seriously threatened with intense homogenization that processes of modernity entail. Kaustav Chakraborty, in his chapter, engages with a cultural context in West Bengal that might be said to be threatened from the homogenizing tendencies of modernity. The Toto indigenous group in Totopara village, as Chakraborty shows, uses the language of transbiology as an effective method to communicate suppressed queer desires. The presence of the norm-setting agents of the 'mainstream' is a serious threat as far as the non-phobic attitudes of Toto tribes towards the erotic are concerned. Chakraborty observes that the family for Toto tribes was seen from a 'utilitarian standpoint, but not sexuality' where women were expected to marry only after conception (91). However, the presence of modern agents – non-government organisations (NGOs), missionaries, and administrators – has considerably altered these erotic landscapes, pushing the pleasure aspects to the sidelines. Folk tales then emerge as one promising area where the obliterated erotic resurfaces and the 'The Pumpkin Prince' and 'The Toad Man' all problematize the distances between the normative and the transgressive. Their queer surfaces resemble shifting forms of body and desire which simultaneously contest the neocolonial machineries and survive as a 'compromised transgressive heterosexual' (110).

Modernity and sexuality: knowledge hierarchies

One central feature of modernity is its pursuit of knowledge about body and sex through, as already mentioned, 'scientifically approved means'. The 'correct' knowledge, disseminated across (non-Western) societies like India through various statist (like schools) and non-statist (like media, NGOs) channels, marginalizes systems of sexuality that do not fit into the heteronormative, monogamous models of sexuality. Chakraborty's chapter, discussed earlier, provides one such case. The chapter written by Ketaki Chowkhani shifts the focus of such knowledge enterprises to another site – education – and discusses the significance of 'unofficial' forms of 'sex education' in schools. The official forms of sex education provided in schools reflect modernity's preoccupation with controlling the subjects' sexuality and channelize sexual energy to heterosexual-reproductive domains. Through ethnography and textual readings, Chowkhani explores the various unofficial forms of sexual knowledge which includes knowledge imparted by peers, pornographic materials including still and moving images, and conversational materials including sexual jokes and swear words. Adolescence is a stage where the

subjects are driven by biological instincts for a 'more perfect' understanding of sex which the unofficial discourse fulfils to a considerable extent. This is because the erotic and aesthetic element of sex which is central to its experience is largely absent from the formal sexual knowledge imparted in the classrooms. This, as Chowkhani suggests, allows us to 'trouble the centrality it [formal sexual education] has acquired over all other forms of sexual knowledge' (132).

Modernity has also produced hierarchies where certain kinds of gender identities and specific forms of sexualities were seen to be superior to others. So, for example, 'masculine' men and heterosexuality became the standards for 'normality'. What is important to keep in mind is the link between gender and sexuality: historical analyses tell us that the two are mutually reinforcing concepts and each helps define the other. Sayantani Sur's contribution, for instance, points at how the Family Planning Programme (FPP) and its campaigning had drastically changed popular perceptions of masculinity in the mid-twentieth century in Bengal. The FPP, as Sur points out, embodied modern aspirations for progress and control. An imagination of the nation, its welfare and economic progress, was at the heart of the FPP campaigning which then addressed masculinity as a cultural quality shaped in a value–moral frame that is innate in male bodies. In other words, FFP, as Sur goes on to suggest, was a space that replaced the erstwhile virile and physical masculinity with a cultural and economic masculinity which then conferred on man 'the power to prevent conception' (through the use of condoms, for example).

There are several contexts that can be explored to understand the historical nature of sexual modernity in India. And, though contemporary manifestations of modernity cannot be exhausted through references to the colonial era, it is nevertheless important to make our way through the colonial thicket before we can get to the postcolonial clearing; many chapters in this volume clearly articulate this position, directly or indirectly. In this respect, three main themes emerge importantly for the Indian context. First, the centrality of sexual politics in colonialism allows us to understand not only the social and political nature of sexuality but also how the logic of colonialism was elaborated by juxtaposing the moral standards of the European colonizer and the non-European natives in the colonies. Thus, 'sexual reform' as a frequently reiterated notion that justified colonialism was introduced in colonies and indigenous sexual mores were frequently regarded as key objects of such reform and were often held up as proof of the 'moral' inferiority of colonized populations. Colonized societies were seen to be characterized by 'passionate unreason' and 'unruliness' (Levine 2006: 125) with regard to sexual behaviour and it was commonly believed that

the native religious and other belief systems often justified 'loose' sexual mores. This 'lack of reason in the sexual arena', as it came to be argued, 'mirrored the colonial incapacity for self-rule' (Levine 2006: 125). While, on the one hand, a significant colonial fear centred around the threat to the white women resident in the colonies from the 'uncontrollably' lascivious black man (see Inglis's discussion for Papua New Guinea, for example; Inglis 1978), non-Western women were also frequently characterized as sexually 'available' (see Alloula 1986 on colonial Algeria). These stereotypes are still relevant and play crucial roles in shaping our understandings of the sexual landscape.

Second, there were differences and similarities between the sexual cultures of the colonial masters and their colonized subjects around the world. And yet the similarities tended to be largely denied. Why was this? For example, there was widespread prevalence of homoeroticism among European populations in the colonies and, for many European men in particular, the relative lack of proscription against homoeroticism was a key attraction for travelling and working in the colonies (Aldrich 2003; Chaudhury 2004). It could be suggested that the *sameness* of some of the sexual practices of the rulers and the ruled was a key threat to claims of moral and cultural superiority by colonial powers. Hence, the assertion of sexual *difference* became an important part of the discourse of colonial difference and European superiority. For, how could ideas of European superiority be established if non-Europeans were to be accepted as having similar attributes as Europeans?

Finally, the contexts, discussed earlier, had a profound impact on the key process of Indian modernity, namely, the national movement. We have already pointed out how Kumaramkandath and Sur actively engage with this theme in their contributions to the volume. On several occasions, the acceptance of the colonially constructed notions of differences and moral hierarchies led the nationalists to adopt positions that were aimed at both 'protecting' the indigenous world of gender as well as producing a sanitized, reformed subjectivity. This separation of the political from the sexual (see Chatterjee's [1989] discussion about home–world distinction that significantly structured the nationalists' negotiations with the colonial government) was, as other scholars have also pointed out (see, for example, John and Nair 1998; Arondekar 2011; Tambe 2009; Kotiswaran 2011), largely reproduced colonial narratives regarding sexual norms.

The chapter by Arunima Deka on the elaborate rituals around menstruation celebrations in Assam in Northeast India shows how the space of rituals objectifies female biology and brings it under social (religious) scrutiny. It

reproduces, in many ways, colonial nature/culture divisions that preoccupied an earlier generation of nationalists. The menstrual celebrations of the upper caste Hindus in Assam are, as Deka points out, sites where female biology is both sanctified and subjected to social surveillance. Thus, the precolonial flux and erotic-ness that primarily laid the foundation for these rituals have now been interpreted in a language of purity and pollution. Shifting a mundane biological process such as menstruation to the realm of the divine 'considerably de-escalates its potential threat to the structures of patriarchy' (154). The sanctification of menstrual blood authenticates its inclusion in the purity/pollution framework leading to the (menstruating) women's total exclusion from the temple premises.

Sexuality, 'identity', and power

Sexual identities are simultaneously historical and contingent. That is to say, they have an unstable nature that is influenced by social and cultural circumstances. Furthermore, 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 the adoption of a 'gay' identity. Although we may say that sexual identities are fictions – that is, 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 had been central to responses to HIV and AIDS. Similarly, the emergence of gay groups in non-Western countries has served to intervene in debates around 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Additionally, such groups have also intervened in debates about other kinds of norms formulated by the postcolonial nation state. These include those who have to do with ideas of 'authentic' Indian cultures that are now being destroyed by 'Westernization'. LGBTIQ writers and activists have played an important role in rethinking notions of the 'ideal' family, and normative gender identities.

There is, however, a persistent debate among scholars and activists in many non-Western countries regarding LGBTIQ identities which centres on the idea that these are 'Western' identities and not really relevant in the context of non-heterosexual behaviour in non-Western countries. We should pay heed to this debate in as much as it brings three significant contexts to our discussion, namely, (*a*) that cultural differences are important to consider, (*b*) non-heterosexual behaviour has also been a 'normal' aspect of Indian

culture, and (*c*) sexual identities are also class identities, inasmuch as 'gay' and 'lesbian' are terms in India that circulate in relatively privileged contexts. Notwithstanding this, many would argue that LGBTIQ identities should be treated as significant aspects of contemporary sexual politics within India and should be given the same attention as 'indigenous' categories (however these might be defined); after all, we do not refuse to travel in trains (or use electricity) because they came from the West.

'Gender' and 'sexuality' are not merely ways of describing specific social relations. They are also sites of contestation and transformation of collective and personal identities. Hence, as gender and sexual norms in a particular society seek to produce ideas about what 'our' culture is, they also give rise to counter-discourses and movements of resistance to these norms. The contestation of established norms is itself a struggle for recognition: *it asks that actually existing state of affairs be recognized for what they are – actually existing – rather than be treated as non-existent through defining norms that wish them away.* So, women's desires, gender oppression, and non-heteronormative behaviour are realities of human existence and cannot simply be swept away by ideas of feminine purity, the natural superiority of men, and the naturalization of heterosexuality.

Transsexual and transgender histories of different societies around the world point to a multitude of sexual and gender identities and behaviours. The *hijra*s of India (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005), the *kathoey* of Thailand (Jackson 1997), and the *waria* (Boellstorff 2008) of Indonesia are only three of several such long-established identities. Many writers on transgender issues, Richard M. Juang notes, 'have referred to cultural systems in which third gender or sexes have an established role in order to develop a critique of the fixity and universality of contemporary Western taxonomies of gender and sex' (Juang 2006: 256). And that 'the existence of other cultural taxonomies is part of a larger body of evidence supporting the claim that western models of sex, gender, and sexuality do not reflect some bedrock cultural necessity but one of several roads of historical development that are open to future change' (Juang 2006: 256).

Given these alternative sexual histories, the situation of postcolonial modernity – where such realities are sought to be suppressed and incorporated into a monolithic nationalist myth of heteronormativity – is a striking one. The history of colonial and postcolonial modernity in the region is, in fact, one of suppression and marginalization of gender and sexual identities that did not (or do not) live up to hypermasculinist ideals produced through a collaboration between colonial discourse and a native elite that aspired to emulate colonial

norms. Notwithstanding the adoption of colonial legal and moral attitudes towards sexuality in most postcolonial societies, there is a great deal of historical as well as contemporary evidence that points to the existence of well-established contexts of homoeroticism in the different regions. So, in performative traditions in India such as the Marathi, Parsi, and Gujarati theatres, men who acted as women were *preferred* to women actors (Hansen 2004). The existence of traditional communities like *hijra*s and *kothi*s (an 'effiminate' man) – to name a few – and the side-by-side existence of heterosexual-identified 'men who have sex with men' (MSM) but also hate men who might be identified (or self-identify as) as homosexual are other interesting contexts in this regard.

Regarding MSM, mentioned earlier, it is necessary to engage with at least two distinct but related contexts. The first relates to the difference between 'behaviour' and 'identity', and the second to notions of masculine identity. The term 'gay' is part of the *identity* politics that pertains both to self-identification as well as an assertion of the right to openly adopt certain lifestyle characteristics. Now, as considerable research shows, there is no dearth of men in India who have homosexual relations, but do not identify as either gay or homosexual (see, for example, Yaqub Ibrahimi 2008; Boyce, Chakrapani, and Dhanikachalam 2011). This has to do with historically significant notions of masculinity: the idea that homosexual men are 'effeminate', weak, and/or 'woman-like'. Hence, while a large number of men have relationships with other men, there is a stigma to being the 'woman' (that is, being penetrated) in the relationship.[1] Different terminologies (*kothi*s and *panthi*s in India, for example) capture this context. There are also regional variations where specific homosexual personas exist with heterosexual identities. The *flute*, considered an aberrant male homosexual subjectivity in several parts of Kerala, is one such instance. The everyday existence of a *flute* – clandestine albeit omnipresent in the urban cruising sites – is marked by its consistent shuttling between reproductive and effeminate masculinity (Kumaramkandath 2013).

The 'colonial' phase is significant in the history of these masculinized forms as well. For instance, as we have already mentioned, the projection of European heterosexuality with the husband–wife model of conjugality at its centre as the

[1] The stigma of homosexuality operates more intensely for the passive than the active male partners who often regard themselves as heterosexuals in a same-sex relationship (Fox 1995). This classification on the basis of sex roles is well-documented and, for a while, became a specialized area within sexuality studies (*also see* Carrier 1995; De Moya and Garcia 1996; Kumaramkandath 2013).

only model suitable for a 'progressive' modern society and as morally superior to other forms of sexual expression has substantially altered the subsequent cultural moral landscapes in India. This further complicates matters as many clandestine homosexual men, as in the case of *flute* mentioned earlier, find it better, convenient and even a necessity to have a 'proper' heterosexual identity by getting married. This also allows them to 'transit regularly between their hetero and homo relationships' (Kumaramkandath 2013: 215). Although being married allows one to remain unnoticed, their (anonymous) presence in public (cruising) spaces can be seen as an open resistance against the hegemonic values. Nevertheless, simultaneously as homosexuality is considered a 'life-cycle' activity, or a harmless 'pastime', it is also situated in a context where it does not disturb traditional notions of masculine identity and responsibility.

The term 'MSM' was introduced into the HIV/AIDS prevention lexicon in the late 1980s in order to account for a group that was considered 'at risk' but could not be accounted for through an identity-related term such as 'gay'. If the cultural politics and debate around terms such as this and others that have gained prominence through NGO activism, Cohen (2005) remind us that classifications have a complex social history and are not 'naturally' produced; they also point to the possibilities of change through research, agitation, and activism. A term such as MSM is also seen as allowing one to circumvent the risks involved in using categories like gay, lesbian, transgender, and so on which are 'inherently' Western. Imposing such categories would 'bring alien concepts to the people involved' (Seabrook 1999: v). Regarding such imposition of 'Western' and 'universalizing' categories on non-Western societies, many scholars and activists now suggest that we ought to simultaneously recognize the long history of non-heteronormative behaviour in the non-Western world. They suggest caution with regard to the temptation to simply label them under the rubrics of 'gay' and 'queer' as this 'ignores the manner in which a particular penetrative Western discourse has interlaced sexuality, gay rights, human right, Oriental convictions, and Social Darwinism in confronting the question of same-sex desire and practice in the non-Western world' (Sarwar 2008: 15).

Custom, law, and sexuality

Moving on to other contexts of identity, one of the ways in which sexuality, gender, and community identity come together can be explored through the notion of 'honour killings' that are prevalent in India and Pakistan in particular. Honour killings occur for different reasons. However, the most frequent reason

concerns perceived transgressions of familial and community boundaries when an 'offending' couple decides to marry on their own accord. It is noticeable that there are significantly more women victims of honour killings than men. The most significant aspect of 'honour' concerns the control of women's sexuality by men. Men's honour is seen to have suffered a slight when a woman makes her own decision regarding a marital bond. Courts do punish the perpetrators of such crimes; however, they also frequently reflect prevalent masculine social attitudes towards female sexuality. So, for example, in many cases, the 'patriarchal bias' (Warraich 2005), embodied in the application of laws, has meant that 'instead of systematically intervening to address the violations of the right to life, judges have focused on the victims conduct and have been influenced by and reflected customary attitudes condoning the control of and violence against women. Even in the most progressive judgments to date, when dealing with "honour killings" the courts have continued to focus on the issue of "provocation"' (Warraich 2005: 104). Judges 'bring to their interpretation of the law very masculinist sex-role stereotypes while manifestly upholding the cause of women' (Uberoi 1995: 321).

Female sexuality and the discourse of 'public women' come together in another way. An example from contemporary Kerala will be helpful. During the 1990s, several scholars have pointed out, there were increasingly strident debates that index 'augmented public fears about sexual transgression' (Devika 2009: 33) by women. Hence, 'visions of dystopia in public discussion in Kerala in the 1990s' is 'painted heavily with the horrors of "sexuality unleashed"' (Devika 2009: 33). Significantly, young women who had been subject to sexual crimes were often portrayed not as having suffered a crime but as those whose 'worldliness' was to blame for the crimes they suffered. So, a high court judgment in the so-called Vithura case of 2000 involving the serial rape of a teenage girl noted that she was a '"lascivious strumpet" who, as the days passed by … "became more and more coquettish and voluptuous by availing the services of beauty parlours"' (Sreekumar 2001, quoted in Devika 2009: 33). As Devika points out, the 'fixation with the sexualisation of female bodies is … telling of how misogyny forms a sizable part of elitist cultural panic' (2009: 34). Women in public spaces not conforming to masculine rules of 'modesty' are frequently the source of a great deal of masculine (and patriarchal) anxiety regarding the 'decline of society'. The 'decline' perspective appears to have particularly salient in an era of contemporary globalization, where women are seen to be affected by the cultural and social changes in a manner not 'befitting' models of 'feminine honour' and respectability.

Sexual violence is another significant context of the politics of sexuality. Rape, as it has been recognized, is more than a physical act: it is also a means of perpetuating symbolic violence that seeks to establish the superiority of masculine identity. Furthermore, in the cases of rape in situations of war and other conflicts, the act also seeks to assert the superiority of the rapist's group over that of the group to which the raped women belong. This relates to the idea that if men are not able to 'protect' the 'honour' of 'their' women, then it is their own honour that has been slighted. Increasingly, feminist thinkers have argued that the manner in which we think about rape is itself problematic, as it significantly draws upon *male* notions of honour. Nivedita Menon suggests that as we simultaneously seek to prevent and punish crimes of honour (and treat these as a human rights issue), we must also seek to problematize the notion that 'rape is the worst thing that can happen to a woman'. According to Menon, we must question the '*meaning* of rape' itself (Menon 2004: 156; original emphasis). For, she says, '"rape as violation" is not only a feminist understanding, it is perfectly compatible with patriarchal and sexist notions of women's bodies and our sexuality' (Menon 2004: 159).

Another factor that figures prominently in contexts of gender and sexuality is caste. Caste has historically functioned as a central factor in organizing gender and sexual relations in India. In the contemporary period, however, we find a confluence of caste and class, especially in urban contexts. This, resulting in a reproduction of the old casteist patriarchies, has fully removed elements of differences in sexual systems among several caste groups and re-created new histories of masculinities and femininities. This is usually achieved through an intense homogenization, undertaken both by the state through law and internally through reform movements, where heteronormativity is accepted as a sign of progressive existence. Juxtaposing gender to caste and class produces new cultural landscapes of desire with their own meanings and contestations.

Kiran Keshavamurthy, in his chapter, in this volume, addresses how the caste dynamics, deeply rooted in the local feudal relations, can render the language of desire more complex. His analysis of the novel *Karamuntar Vutu* (Karamuntar House) published in 1998 by the Tamil author Tanjai Prakash (1943–2000) shifts the projection of this interplay between caste and sexed bodies. The feudal power relations that operate primarily through caste hierarchies constitute a central element in the novel. It depicts how the neat lines of these divisions are frequently disturbed by relations forged on the basis of desire. While the body remains the centre of desire, it is also a locus

of power and forms and discourses of identity. Thus, sexual relations that transgressed the boundaries of caste and, sometimes, even gender were not so uncommon. However, such relations very often remained clandestine and their subjects consistently struggled to moderate their impact. Their quotidian nature makes them subversive although, as the analysis reveals, the transgressions very often takes place within an accepted form of gender hierarchy; that is, it mostly involves upper-caste men and lower-caste women. When the opposite happens, there is a violent reaction.

Speaking of transgressions, *hijra*s, the traditional transgender community with a presence in several parts of India, have invoked serious engagement among scholars and policymakers alike through their ambiguous position in the Indian caste, gender hierarchies. A much-discussed topic – *hijra*s occupy a central position in the Indian sexual–cultural imaginations. Despite the formation of sexual hegemonies in Indian context, they remain as real and significant in the present as in pre-modern socio-cultural locations. Their visibility and centrality in the Indian sexual landscapes are now being legalized under pressures from emerging sexuality and human rights discourses. However, this again is a troubled area due to the peculiar normativity that structures *hijra*s communities, as Brinda Bose, in her chapter in this volume, shows. It is difficult, as Bose points out, to read the fluid, non-normative but established kinship structures that have prevailed among the *hijra*s via the rigid statist perspective which gesture towards a new understanding. This incongruity is a result of the state's and the society's unwillingness to recognize *hijra*s' sexual identity 'without stigmatising it'. According to Bose, then, this 'propensity to contain and sanitize the sexually deviant' *hijra*s continues to preoccupy the Indian state even with changes happening on several other fronts as, for instance, the acceptance of third gender status that deserves formal assistance as a marginalized socio-economic group.

Conclusion

The topic of sexualities is frequently approached either through a biological lens or through one that assumes a fixed cultural template. Therefore, for the Indian case, Gandhian sexuality finds an important place and it is common to suggest a direct link between contemporary Indian sexual cultures and 'classical Indian love texts' such as Vatsayayana'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,

assertions of non-heterosexual identities, global sexual-health programmes, the effects of new consumer cultures, changing patterns of work and leisure among young women, the changing realms of caste and other forms of tradition, and the effects of different media flows. Furthermore, it is also inadequate to assume that ideas around sexuality in non-Western countries have been as stable as is sometimes posited in, say, 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 sexual culture is, however, worth thinking about for another reason: 'What anxieties does it express?' and 'what kinds of positions of power does it embody?' The chapters in this collection seek to explore these questions through both multiple methodologies as well as the varied sites where sexual cultures produce social life.

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