Living in the shadows: lesbians in India

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Introduction: lesbians in Indian society

Lesbians in India are conspicuous by their lack of visibility in mainstream society. If one were to accept the Indian government's stance concerning sexual minorities, lesbians would not exist[1]. Sadly, this is an attitude that resonates with large parts of Indian society even today. Lesbian invisibility has become a deep-seated feature of society and has had a deterring effect on the formation of a lesbian community: as opposed to the visible male homosexual community, lesbian networking has largely taken shape on the peripheries of society's consciousness. This is partly due to the strong patriarchic undercurrents, the male supremacy and the homophobia that have shaped women's lives in India, lesbians have remained largely invisible, waiting in the shadows and hoping for change.

This report proposes explore the issue of 'lesbianism' in contemporary India. Situating them within the socio-cultural and historical context, the report will discuss two main issues that challenge lesbian lives in India today and will then focus on responses that have emerged from local Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) support communities in an attempt to address these challenges. Although the work has come a long way in improving certain aspects of lesbian women's lives in India, it has not led to substantial structural change yet; this is particularly the case in India's more rural regions. However, if lesbians are to become an integral and accepted part of Indian society, a deep restructuring of mentalities is necessary.

Struggling with the shadows: key issues

This section will first present a short assessment of women's lives in India in an attempt to set the context for understanding lesbian lives and the main issues that pose distinct challenges. Intricately bound together, these issues arise mainly out of the rigidity of the partriarchal system of social order in India.

The first point in question is the denial of a lesbian identity. Extremely pertinent to lesbians in India, this question seeks to understand the manner in which they perceive themselves and their roles in society, and to regard how these perceptions are shaped by society. Intimately linked with the notion of public perceptions and their impact on lesbian women's decisions is the issue of marriage. According to numerous LGBT support groups, marriage poses by far the largest problem that lesbians face – second only to matters of identity. While marriage may affect the lives of many women in India, the lesbian case demands special attention, as it includes a dimension of fear of being 'found out' that impacts heavily on the quality of their lives.

Situating lesbians in the Indian context

Indian society could be regarded as one of the most diverse societies on earth. Created by centuries of internal faultlines along the lines of caste, (class)[2], religion and gender, the thus created divisions tend to affect particularly lesbian women adversely[3]. The confluence of these internal divisions with a highly patriarchal form of state and social order results in the creation of complex webs of dependencies and oppression, within which women are caught, bound and silenced.

These complex webs are most discernible in India's rural regions. Women in rural India tend to be more vulnerable to

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longstanding patriarchal and quasi-feudal systems of repression than in anonymous, urban settings such as in New Delhi or in Mumbai[4]. In accordance to these patriarchal values, a woman's social standing tends to be evaluated in terms of her affiliation with male members of her family, i.e. as being the wife of, the mother of or the daughter of somebody[5]. Constituting further layers of oppression, religion plays an important role in shaping women's lives, particularly those of Muslim faith; this will be touched upon later in this section.

Another large and influential element in the process of forming women's identities is the institution of the family. It is embedded within a strong sense of communitarianism and represents a tight-knit community within which personal space is seldom respected. In addition, women are often reduced to an infantile status by these family ties, treating them as incapable of taking care of themselves, both economically and socially[6].

The combination of extreme familial dependence and this lack of personal space have been accentuated in the context of lesbians in India. To them, the enclosedness of the family can amount to a threat rather than offering a safe haven. This feeling of confinement invites constant fears of being found out and harassed for having the aberrant emotional and sexual preferences[7].

India today has largely sough to marginalize and ignore the LGBT community. Ancient accounts of lesbian love exist but have been covered by layers of homophobia that are only slowly starting to fall off. For a long period of time, though, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code encouraged such homophobic sentiments. Essentially, the section criminalizes particularly male homoerotic encounters and has served to reinforce what have been overwhelmingly negative public reactions to homosexuality[8].

Discriminative attitudes like these have reportedly had an impact on how lesbian women in general have perceived themselves and their position in Indian society[9]. The consequences of being 'found out' have been portrayed as being horrific: in many cases, women were forced out of their families into a community of 'social lepers', i.e. people who are regarded as being 'alien','normatively deviant' and cases of mental illness[10]. The social stigma attached to being a lesbian could thus be seen as a reason for many women not to embrace their lesbianism, particularly not in the public sphere. Instead of defining themselves by their lesbian identities as is common among many LGBT individuals in Europe, accounts suggest, that suppressing one's sexual and emotional preferences and making them subservient to the family's wishes often seems like the easier solution[11]. It is therefore not uncommon among lesbian women in India who have entered into heterosexual marriages turning to anonymous helplines for lesbian women, struggling to balance their identity with society's ideal woman: the motherly, feminine and 'pure' being[12].

Marriage plays a very large role in this context, as the institution represents a solid pillar of Indian culture and tradition. Even today, (rural) India frowns upon single women who do not conform to these longstanding traditions of arranged marriages[13]. In an attempt to avoid such condemnation, self-acknowledging lesbians do contemplate marrying homosexual men by entering into a marriage contract, as the LGBT organization Sanginii states[14]. In certain cases where the familial pressure is unbearably high, contracts like these can provide a subterfuge, for lesbian women as well as for gay men. It offers an alternative to lesbians that has the potential of enabling to have access to the same social, financial and political gains that other women can access through their husbands[15]. In a sense, marriages like these could be seen as a form of lesbian empowerment, as it requires these women to take agency and actively arrange such marriages for themselves before their families can act.

Interestingly, instances have been noted where lesbian couples married each other by invoking Hindu rituals that allow for a union of same-sex couples[16]. Such engagements, however, have been the subject of much spite and hatred stoked by the media, leading politicians and religious leaders – and not least by ferocious female advocates of 'Indian traditions'[17]. Fearing the subversion of set power hierarchies, and even their own positions in societies, spokeswomen like these tend to reinforce existing negative portrayals of lesbians.

In contrast to these women, the male opposition is arguably born out of deep-seated fears of emasculation and an irrational fear that such unions would make men redundant.[18]

Public outcries at marriages between women, such as the marriage of the two police women Leela and Urmila in

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1987, who were severely chastised, have acted as deterrents for many women to come 'out' and publicly marry their partners[19]. Their case is a good example as it illustrates how 'coming out' in India puts women brave enough to do so into highly precarious situations; their everyday lives are underlined by a strong sense of uncertainty and under Section 377 of the IPC even the fear of being jailed for having 'abnormal' emotional and/or sexual preferences[20][21]. The example additionally alludes to the difficulties that lesbians face once they are 'out': socially, economically and politically marginalized, these women are faced by rejection on every societal level. One example of such rejection is the discharge of Urmila and Leela from the civil service on grounds of 'inappropriate behaviour', a phenomenon that surfaces even today in the context of 'identified' lesbians in the workforce[22]. Lesbians – as much as non-lesbian Indian women – are truly tied by a strong sense of communitarianism that demands their conformity with the community. So unless these women are willing to pay the high price of becoming social outcasts, they have to find ways of balancing their identities whilst living up the society's standards and their family's wishes.

Extending a helping hand: lesbian support groups in India

Sadly, one of the most noticeable aspects about LGBT work done by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is the fact that even within a community in which definitions of 'gender' are challenged and inverted, male/female inequalities still persist, in the sense that lesbian and bisexual women's organizations seem to be much less publicly known than their male 'counterparts'[23]. In some sense, this lack of attention is rather convenient, as it secures the lesbians frequenting such organizations more anonymity. Anonymity and discretion are two highly valued principles that are upheld by LGBT support groups. It is therefore not surprising that many LB NGOs are located in urban areas, which provide a much larger scope for enveloping women in the anonymity they display. Efforts are channelled into increasing the comprehensiveness and inclusivity of programmes for lesbian women (see Sahayatrika in Kerala, a support group with a strong rural outreach programme) [24]. Identifying lesbians living in rural areas however remains difficult[25]. As a result, the rural space continues to be a highly problematic area for such outreach programmes. Interestingly, the internet[26] has offered a way out of this dilemma: it has become one of the most accessible ways of offering lesbians help and support without subjecting them to public scrutiny.

Supporting lesbians in building up confidence in themselves and accepting this part of their identity has been a main objective of LB support groups. One way of approaching this issue has been by placing the lesbian in the Indian context by elucidating their role in Indian history and Hindu mythology. The literature on Indian lesbians of other faiths, particularly Islam, is rather obscure and suggests, that these womens' sexuality may be covered under more layers of silence than lesbians of other faiths[27]. Consequently, the majority of support groups tend to be Hindu-oriented, even if spiritual support is often not part of their mission statement.

The Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association (GALVA) take a different approach: looking to the past, GALVA seeks to embed LGBT individuals within (Hindu) Vaishnava tradition, offering excerpts from the Bhagavad Gita that correspond to a modern understanding of homosexuality[28]. Thus reinforcing lesbians' identities, granting them emotional security and a sense of self-esteem. In the wider scope of things, this approach adheres to a notion of human security and is supposed to assist in creating open and tolerant communities that are more amenable to accepting sexual minorities in their midst.

The Sanginii Trust is one such an organization; it is an LB organization focused on counseling and community support for Lesbians. One of their main aims is to dispel existing 'myths' about Lesbianism, such as Lesbianism as an alien concept, and to confirm that these women are, in fact, completely normal. They also offer practical advice and step-by-step solutions to questions such as 'Who should I tell?. Much of Sanginii's efforts – both through online and personal counseling – is based on making these women feel more comfortable with their sexual, emotional preferences and their identities as lesbians. As referred to earlier, it is important to make these women feel confident in these identities, and to strengthen their assertiveness against societal notions of lesbianism as inherently unnatural.

Sangama and Sakhi, for instance, offer weekly group meetings for lesbians, thus combating feelings of isolation and giving them an opportunity to meet like-minded women while having open discussions about their sexuality[29]. They further promise 'safe spaces', i.e. private niches that substitute for the lack of public space afforded to lesbians. Thus

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instead of having public 'cruising areas'[30] like many of their male counterparts do, these women are offered back-door solutions with similar results: far removed from the public eye, these spaces are used to explore physical pleasure as part of an identity consolidation project[31]. Such spaces can be seen as part of a larger strategy to combat lesbian's feelings of being misunderstood and misjudged by society. Another vital element of this strategy is the process of situating lesbians within India's socio-cultural and historical context.

Films such as 'Sancharram'[32] and publications by lesbians living and writing abroad, such as Ruth Vanita, have successfully identified lesbian love as an important part of India's past and integral to India's future as a complex and diverse society.

NGO work in this field thus targets lesbians through helplines, counseling and advocacy services, as well by attempting to influence the communities surrounding them by opening LB research centers and holding educational campaigns to raise awareness of lesbian invisibility in Indian society[33].

Ultimately, educational programs and campaigns for lesbians are geared towards making them understand and respect themselves and eventually, to empower them. The Samabhavana society offers such empowerment schemes by equipping lesbians with special training modules in an effort to increase their economic competitiveness and facilitate economic independence[34]. They also provide for free sexual health clinics, ensuring the (good) health and safety of these women. Interestingly, some of the organisations, such as Sanginii, target the institution of marriage directly by offering legal advice in terms of documents needed for a contract marriage and by advising on the necessary further steps to take. Aanchal and Humrahi, two LB organizations for instance, point to alternative law forums that also offer legal advice, often in the context of being jailed in offense of Section 377[35].

This section was repealed in June 2009 after an intense lobbying period by HIV/AIDS prevention agencies, LGBT groups and Human Rights lawyers and was framed as a huge breakthrough. What was then celebrated as a complete decriminalization of LGBT sexualities has in reality changed little for lesbians. Only peripherally affected by the section in the first place, the revocation of the section has not resulted in large-scale change for lesbians[36]. It did, however, bring the issue of homoeroticism back into the public discourse. And with personalities like Amartya Sen and Bollywood star Celina Jaitley[37] championing the repeal of this section, 'LGBT-ness' has become more acceptable – at least virtually.

Conclusion

Lesbians in India could still be described as little more than shadows. Largely silenced and marginalized, these women are not recognized as legitimate part of the mainstream society yet. However, this is not an issue solely pertaining to the Indian society; rather, the overall trend seems to favour homosexual men over lesbian women. This trend suggests, that it may be a structural problem born out of inherent gender inequalities within the global system. In identifying such larger, structural inequalities, it might be advantageous to utilize a multipronged approach that focuses both on local and global action. While forging stronger ties between lesbian communities in various countries might strengthen their voices and would certainly help in determining similar problems and finding common solutions, it is also crucial to create a local community of lesbian women that feel confident enough to speak out. As mentioned in the report, a human security approach to the topic might be an effective way of doing so.

Within the current scope of lesbian support action in India, this approach proposes to promote fairer societies by preventing the alienation of lesbians as important elements of society, regarding them as human beings that contribute to the character of a society.

Instead of targeting select groups then, this approach advocates a comprehensive approach, that includes involving mainstream society in lesbian issues, thus generating a deeper and more personal understanding of the issue.

Lesbian NGOs in India have decided to take this path and it is now up to Indian society to accept this offer, in an effort to become more open, tolerant – and inclusive.

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[1] According to estimates, ca. 10% of the Indian population is homosexual/ lesbian, see p.30 in Esther D. Rothblum, 'Indian and South Asian American Lesbians' in *Classics in Lesbian Studies*, (New York: Hayworth Press, 1997) pp. 129-132

[2] Class is could be seen as a fairly modern phenomenon and thus would have affected Indian society for decades, not centuries.

[3] See the PUCL-K Human rights violations against sexual minorities , see http://sangama.org/files/sexual-minorities.pdf (last accessed 24 February 2010)

[4] see p. 144 in Chayanika Shah,'The roads that E/Merged' in Feminist Activim and Queer Understanding' in *Queering India: Same-sex love and eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 144-152

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[5] see pp. 113 in Giti Thadani, 'Love and Death' in *Sakhiyani: Lesbian desire in ancient and modern India* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 101-114

[6] see the Laws of Manu, 200 BC 'In her childhood, a girl should be under the will of her father. In her youth, of her husband. Her husband being dead, of her sons. A woman should never enjoy her own will.', LawMuseum, http://duhaime.org/LawMuseum/LawArticle-297/200-BC–Laws-of-Manu.aspx (last accessed 13 March 2010)

[7] see pp. 116 in Giti Thadani, *Sakhiyani*

[8] see Unnatural Offences, Ch. XVI Of Offences Affecting the Human Body, http://www.mppolice.gov.in/Static/IPC%20and%20CrPC/IPC/chapter16.htm (last accessed 21 February 2010)

[9] see pp. 112 in Giti Thadani, *Sakhiyani*

[10]pp.15 in Suparna Bhaskaran, The Politics of Penetration in Queering India: Same-sec love in Indian Culture and Society, edt Ruth Vanita (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 15-30

[11] pp. 17, Maya Sharma, *Loving Women*

[12] ibid

[13] p. 130 in Esther D. Rotblum, *Classics*

[14] see Sanginii Trust's website, http://www.sanginii.org/sangini.htm (last accessed 21 March 2010)

[15] see Sanginii Trust

[16] see the description of a sacred union of souls in Ruth Vanita,'Wedding of Two Souls: Same-Sex Marriage and Hindu Traditions' in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* , Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 2004), pp. 119-135

[17] see p. 43 in Gautam Bhan, Challenging the Limits of Law: Queer Politics and legal reform in India,*Queering India,* pp. 42-50

[18] see pp. 105 in Giti Thadani, *Sakhiyani*

[19] see p. 152, Chayanika Shah, 'The roads that E/Merged'

[20]Section 377 of the IPC criminalizes any sexual encounter not confoming to heterosexual norms. Although not directly discriminative of lesbians, Section 377 has been used as a tool against suspicious women/ lesbians in an effort to sideline these 'deviant' elements of society and has, thus, been used to jail Lesbians that have come out.

[21] See pp. 26 in Suparna Bhaskaran, The Politics of Penetration in*Queering India : Same-Sex love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society,* edt. Ruth Vanita, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 15-30

[22] see p. 11 in Maya Sharma, Loving Women

[23] See the PUCL-K HR report and Preeta Nair, 'Coming out of the Shadows' in India Today, July 8, 2009

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[25] see p. 3 in Maya Sharma, Loving Women

[26] India has an estimated 32-46 million active Internet users, according to Sify Business, http://indianembassy.ru/indiachronicle/nov08/infotech.html (accessed 19 March 2010)

[27] One Day, One Struggle: Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, http://www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/article/takeaction/partners/1026.html (last accessed 2 March 2010)

[28] the Bhagavad Gita, loosely translated as the 'Song of the Blessed One' is a sacred Hindu text that is incorporated into one of ancient India's main epics; it takes the form of a philosophical dialogue and could be seen as an ethical guide to life.

[29] see p. 115 in Giti Thadani, 'Lesbian identities', *Sakhiyani*

[30] 'to cruise' is a term used in the homosexual context of finding men willing to embark on short sexual adventures. The setting tends to be anonymous and includes public spaces such as certain Parks or Cafés.

[31] See Sangama, http://sangama.org/campaigns/LesBiT (last accessed 2 March 2010)

[32] Sancharram is a film about lesbian love set in Kerala., as this region has been notorious for it's high rate of lesbian suicides. For a discussion of the film in terms of its 'queerness', see Gayatri Gopinath*in A Companion to Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Studies*, edt. by George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry, pp. 341-355.

[33] See CALERI, a Lesbian Rights initiative with a large LB resource center, the Queer Azadi marches, http://queerazaadi.wordpress.com/ (last accessed 27 March 2010)

[34] see http://www.samabhavanasociety.org/education.html (last accessed 17 March 2010)

[35] Ranjita Biswas, 'Breaking the silence over India's lesbian taboo', http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=19704 (accessed 16 March 2010)

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