10. The only criticism I have of Seabrook is that he seems to assume that lower-class gay, kothi or MSM-identified men are necessarily always out, or never marry.
11. The website can be accessed at www.gaybombay.cc.

References

Chowdhary, Sandip Roy. 2 December 2002, 'GayBombay', http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2002/12/02/gay-india.

Sal. 'To the Death of Gay Activism in Singapore', http://www.sgboy.com/st/fecoaO2.htm. Accessed online 24 July 2004.

Seabrook, Jeremy. 1999, *Love in a Different Climate*. London: Verso.

Seshadri, P. and L. Ramakrishnan. 1999, 'Queering Gender: Trans Liberation and Our Lesbigay Movements', *Trikone*, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 6–8, 18.

9

The Roads that E/Merged

Feminist Activism and Queer Understanding

Chayanika Shah

International Women's Day, 8 March 2004. While attending the Joint Women's Groups celebrations, some of us sit with bated breath as the names of the groups organising the programme are read out. One of the activists from a 'mainstream' women's group reads out the names one after the other and then, without any fumbling or any kind of hesitation, she reads the name of our newly renamed collective, "Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action"[1] (LABIA), and we are elated at hearing her pronounce the *L**** word.

Why that anxiety? Why were we almost certain that she would fumble? Why the happiness at a name being read out? Why was it important for us to rename ourselves and be addressed as such? Were we being paranoid? Were we not living in March of 2004? There is a small story to each of these questions and I sit here trying to trace the story from a very subjective position. I am sure there shall be a number of ways to see it all—maybe more exhaustive, more theoretical, more factual.... But I shall do my bit of living two decades of activism within the women's movement and almost a decade within the queer movement.

Claiming Women's Spaces

I joined the urban women's movement as part of the Mumbai-based collective, Forum Against Oppression of Women,[2] more than two decades ago and have stayed with it all these years. The early years of the 1980s were a heady time. It was a time for street actions and also a time for staking our claim as women. It was wonderful to ascribe words to ideas that I did not know

existed inside my head. My political understanding of why society was the way it was grew with a composite understanding of how gender, class and caste affected its institutions and structures. I learnt ways to define myself as a woman, learnt to claim rights over my body, learnt to like it and make friends with it, alongside learning to love others like myself.

We critiqued the family and, many of us, in our personal lives questioned the institution of marriage (even though many of us entered it with the hope of bending its rules backward and forward). In intimate conversations we spoke of openness of all kinds in relationships and of all the kinds of relationships that people experienced. Some of us, even then, were keen to identify and speak of ourselves as lesbian or bisexual while others were happy to lead the kind of life that we led. After all, 'what was there in how I called myself, my relationship was the important thing'. We thought we were very radical. In the few attempts made to classify the Indian women's groups with the Western classification terminology, we, in the Forum, were often branded as the 'radical feminists' (although we were sure we were the 'Marxist feminists').

We were active in the campaigns against rape that demanded that rape be understood as the use of patriarchal power against women's bodies, thus reclaiming new definitions of being women. We fought against all violence, particularly within the marital family, and set up spaces for women to talk about their abuse and deal with their horrifyingly violent daily lives. Though we worked towards unmasking the institutions of family and marriage we did not take the analysis or actions to the extent of questioning their very right to exist. Our demands were for basic minimum human dignity and the recognition of rights for women within these institutions.

In Mumbai, as independent working women wanting to own the city, its roads, its public spaces and its public transport in particular. One of the most proactive and energising campaigns was towards making the women's compartments in the local trains free of men (and hence abuse) for all the 24 hours of the day.[3] Travelling in late-night trains, throwing off the men who tried to enter the compartments and the constant negotiations with the authorities gave many of us the arrogance and the courage to walk the streets of the city at any hour of the day and night. This, like the 'take back the night' campaigns, gave us freedom in the city as well as a sense of ownership of public spaces and that in turn helped us to experience a definite sense of independence.

Later came the struggles and campaigns against hazardous contraceptives and, in the process of fighting them, the need to define birth control for ourselves, new understandings of and friendships with our bodies and once

again a look at intimate relationships, particularly with men. Alongside this, were the struggles for gender-just laws governing intimate relationships within which the institutions of marriage and family were under scrutiny yet again.

Facing Hidden Realities

In between all this, our radical group, which met for its weekly meetings in a lesbian household, was shaken out of its complacency by two women far away in a small town in Madhya Pradesh. Two women constables decided to get married to each other and this resulted in their losing their jobs and other victimisations.[4] We were forced to acknowledge other realities—of lives outside cities and violent marriages, of violence that was so invisible that it did not even get a name or mention until it crossed a 'limit', and also the reality of our groups and campaigns that had not taken such realities into account and when faced with them could not really figure out a way of dealing with them. We tried a human rights approach at that time—no person should lose her job on such grounds, the state cannot violate the rights of its citizens in this manner, and so on.

For those two women maybe we were not able to do anything. But the discussions that we had as a group changed something for us permanently. Since then, at least in our urban, English-speaking group, lives and realities of homosexual women kept coming up in everything that we took up. Be it the discussion on gender-just laws for looking at intimate relationships, topics to be discussed at National Conferences, or our discussions about our body. Slowly and steadily, these thus far excluded lives were being included and finding a space. In fact, these lives started forcing a space within the larger women's movements as well thanks to the persistence of a few women and groups like ours.

The journey has not been smooth. There was a decent share of opposition but there was support as well. This pattern was repeated at every level. In our group, amongst other similar autonomous women's groups, and within the larger women's movements, there was a fair share of support and opposition Many times the constituents of each section were unexpected, surprising u by not conforming to the general trend of their politics.

I suddenly note a change in the 'we' that I am using and so I think it is important to pause and track my own personal journey as well. I sit pondering over the keyboard for a long time trying to figure out where did I change and when and why? For I was one of those who thought that relationships were important, identities were restricting and soon I found myself

in the category willing to identify as lesbian, wanting to stand up and say that I exist and have existed, slowly becoming a part of that small group that wanted space for lesbian and bisexual women, identified thus, within the larger women's movements. It would be nice to be able to give neat little causality statements like you know this happened and so then I changed and so on. But life does not give us such clear indicators of cause and effect and so I venture to mention what to me in hindsight seem to be the possible reasons.

I think it was mainly the fatigue of leading a hidden life, for even if I was open to an extent, this openness meant a lot of untruths and hiding. It was painful to hide the importance of my relationships from those that mattered and I soon realised that as this was an integral part of who I was, when people did not know it, they did not know a large part of me. Besides this, there was the experience of coming out to 'near and dear' ones, to parts of the family, to comrades and friends, to others in the women's movements. The reaction was expected and yet the intensity of hatred and discomfort expressed at times was unexpected. It was not easy and somewhere it made me resolve that things had to change. Coming out, becoming visible and claiming spaces became an important agenda.

At this point, a few women got together and set up Stree Sangam, a lesbian and bisexual women's collective in Mumbai in 1995. Soon I became part of it. The idea for all of us was to not remain hidden all the time, to be more visible and at the same time to create spaces where women could feel safe and comfortable with other women like themselves, and to prepare society to accept people like us, women like us.

It was around the same time, in the mid-1990s, when suddenly the overall scenario in society also changed. Sexuality itself became something that people started talking about a lot. Partly it was the presence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the work that was being done around it by various agencies and also the pressures of the funding agencies with their West-driven agendas. Many groups of 'sexual minorities' came into being under the garb of the two kinds of organisations mentioned above.

The last 10 years have been very exciting and challenging in many ways for us, as women who identify themselves as lesbian and bisexual. We were trying to straddle the two worlds of women's organising and 'sexual minorities' organising. These worlds were very different and the experiences of both have informed each other in ways that have altered our individual and collective worldviews substantially. But before I discuss how this happened, I would like to talk a little about what was it that was typical of both these worlds.

Lesbians are Women too

We claimed space within the women's movements. We recognised from our own lives and those of other women who came in contact with Stree Sangam that women's groups could be the safe spaces in which women could open up, make contact and reach out. We pointed out that there was no such clear space and we demanded that this space be created. We laid claim over the women's movements and demanded that these movements in turn take up our struggle as part of the larger struggle of all women. In a sense, we recognised that we were one of those oppressed minorities who had been invisibilised by the larger women's movements.

As someone who considers herself totally a part of the women's movements, I know that we[3] have been guilty of neglecting and sidelining issues of many different sections of women. We were talking of all women but were concentrating on women from a certain class, caste, region, religion and sexuality. From time to time, Dalit women, tribal women, women from religious minorities, single women and now lesbian and bisexual women have pointed out that their issues do not have space or are not prioritised within the women's movements. The plural use of 'women's movements' instead of the singular is, in fact, an acknowledgement of this neglect and an honest attempt at saying, but also believing, that 'women' are no generic category. Their issues had to be raised in multiple ways through multiple strategies by several groups with diverse understandings.

Each of these sections of women and those advocating for their inclusion, have faced varying degrees of rejection and acceptance. So as far as lesbian and bisexual women go, active violence against them is of course condemned. At the same time, individual personal and collective group responses in different situations, have included statements like, 'It is not normal'; 'I do not approve'; 'Our women will not be able to identify with groups whose names contain words like Lesbian and so we cannot march with them for 8th March'; 'There are no lesbian women amongst the women that we work with'; 'This is alright for urban groups. We cannot raise it anywhere'; 'Women's friendships are so accepted within our society. If you start naming them like this you shall take away that anonymous space that women have today'; and many more—ranging from those expressing utter disgust to those trying to be politically correct but falling just short.

There was resistance expressed by not allowing a group campaigning for lesbian rights to march in a Women's Day rally along with other women's groups on 'regular women's' demands or active opposition to discussions on 'such' issues at National Conferences of Women's Movements. Passive

opposition came in the form of groups just not prioritising issues of lesbian and bisexual women in their regular work. A few also actually believed that silence meant safety and anonymity for women in relationships. In their view, we would endanger the ways in which women live female friendships and hence we should not be too visible or 'aggressive'.

Beyond Invisibility

For those of us who identified as lesbian/bisexual and also identified with the women's movements, working with groups focusing on issues of 'sexual minorities' (or whatever was the right term) was also not easy. Finding women like us was the most difficult task. In a society that does not allow any public space for women, where and how were we going to be able to find women like us? In the absence of any known names with which we could identify ourselves proudly, how were we to ask someone we thought was like us, whether she was really 'like us'? If women identified their relationships as friendships, were we not imposing our understanding of the special character of this friendship by giving it a name which was not known or was much maligned? The shroud of invisibility did not make any space for any sort of interaction.

The newspapers continued to report on other women like the ones in Bhopal, those who got married, or were separated, or attempted suicide for fear of being separated from each other. These women were from all over the country. They were women and young girls from small villages and small towns. We managed to make contact with some of them but with many others we were too late. They were either no more or were under too much pressure to make contact. While we never stopped hearing from everyone that all of these were issues of urban, English-speaking women; isolated and lonely women who were apparently very unlike us, who allowed their lives and desires to succumb to marriage or suicide, often voicing their desire to live differently but not knowing that other ways of living were possible.

In the urban areas we could meet more women. These women were sometimes more aware of the language of women's desires for women, and some identified as lesbian or bisexual. But many were very closeted and although they wanted spaces to meet other women, they were afraid of being identified. They were concerned with issues of safety, security and loneliness and needed safe networks and safe spaces to meet other women.

Some of these women who came to Stree Sangam were looking for such social spaces. They found our kind of groups boring and not enough fun. They were usually not interested in any kind of political action. Visibility, organising, patriarchy, sexual politics, rights and fighting or struggling for

them were alien concepts or at least they seemed like issues that they did not want to get involved in. Those of us who identified as lesbian feminists, were oscillating between wanting to connect with other women, grappling to find ways in which we could find them and reach out to them, and the utter exhaustion of being a support system to even a handful.

The absence of supportive families in many of our lives meant that there was tremendous demand and claim over a support system which was itself a toddler looking for support. The need for invisibility and the fear of being found out added to the confusion. And instances of families getting violent, of complaining to the police, of housing societies throwing women out of rented apartments on 'accidentally' finding out, did not help at all. We were trying to reach out as much as we could—when adult women were kept locked up in their homes, when they lost their housing or their jobs, or when they went through relationship troubles and break-ups. This small miniscule support system though inadequate, was all there was. There was an urgent need to create more spaces and to do something to make life more liveable for all those who were forced to remain silent and invisible.

Some of us tried to set up phone help lines and other safe, accessible spaces for all women who loved women. Others tried to look further into the structural inadequacies of the medical and legal systems that justify violence against lesbian and bisexual women, in fact against all those who challenge the predominant hetero-normativity in society. We worked with women's groups and supportive human rights groups and initiated dialogues and campaigns to work towards changes within law. We joined campaigns against Section 377 with them and other gay groups. We also had discussions on other existing laws and on defining our demands for a non-discriminating society in future.

We also tried consistently to ally and work with others in the extended 'sexual minorities' community (which was slowly emerging as the alphabet soup LGBTKQHE....}—the gays, the kothis, the hijras.... Many of their lives and realities were very different from ours. Their issues were more related to public spaces, ours were about invisibility. We were trying to find a community with them—a community which believed in looking at our collective issues and lives within the frameworks of a politics akin to ours. A politics that dealt with injustice, violence, discrimination across all divisions of society, that moved further with a vision of a new world. We were not always successful.

The patriarchal behaviour of the gay community sometimes really baffled us. Women were almost completely absent from many of their worlds. The absence of any understanding of 'gender' and patriarchy was extremely

difficult to deal with, especially since their lives constantly challenged the mainstream notions in so many ways all the time. The absence of any dialogues and connections with other progressive movements and politics was frustrating.

It was a weird experience for someone like myself who had spent years in autonomous women-only spaces. The misogyny in the behaviour of some gay men was difficult to deal with. It was strange to see the multiple ways in which notions of femininity (that we had been constantly battling against) were being reinforced by the very acts that transgressed the borders of hetero-normativity as I understood it. The 'queens' were beautiful but at times they forced me to be more 'woman' than I felt and at other times they made me question my new feminist definitions of being a woman.[5] And yet, meeting them, seeing them and being with them made me see many more dimensions of my life as a person who questioned hetero-normativity of society. It expanded my understanding of society, of patriarchy, of gender.

Out in the Open

Over the last 10 years within Stree Sangam/LABIA, within the Forum and amongst a few of us who have been reading on, thinking about and conducting workshops on sexuality with different groups of people, discussions on sex, gender and sexuality have become more complex. We have all changed, shifted and moved in our understandings, individually and collectively. We have discovered other like-minded allies across the country—people from lesbian groups, other 'sexual minority' groups, women's groups, human rights groups and many individuals too. It is due to the concerted efforts of all these people to raise issues and complicate discussions at all fora and in all possible progressive spaces that we were able to change Stree Sangam's name last year.

It is this collective work that has created a situation where we are officially a part of the women's movements. It is the outcome of many visible and not so visible battles and skirmishes that the person reading out our group's name on 8 March 2004, did not stop, pause and want to vanish when reading it. We are not hidden any more under innocuous sounding names like 'Stree Sangam' but we are out in the open, stating who we are. We are in a position today to identify ourselves as a politically active lesbian feminist group which plans to work with other groups towards breaking silences, towards making society more open to women's desires, towards finding names for ourselves and our loves, towards making this a safer space for all those, whether visible or invisible, to lead their lives in ways that they choose to live in. As we proudly said in one issue of *Scripts*, the magazine that we produce,

> Stree Sangam has decided to reinvent itself, in name and in deed. Today we conceive of ourselves as a campaign and action group of queer women called Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Action. We choose to remain autonomous and non-funded. We choose to speak loudly and proudly of who we are and want to reclaim the space for political action and personal expression. We see oppression based on gender and sexuality as part of the same hetero-patriarchal norms that oppress other marginalised peoples as well. We wish to continue to ally with others, who, like us believe that working towards a society where all genders and sexualities would be respected and treated equally is necessary. Our strategies are multiple and complex, but our alliances are crucial. As are our politics and our lives (*Scripts* 2003: 13).

E/Merging Paths

This journey has helped me and those with me look at our feminisms with greater scrutiny. We do feel that by visibilising women's lived realities, we will help create a world where more women will have the space and support to live the lives that they want. Besides addressing the violence of silence around issues of lesbian and bisexual women's lives, this also helps open spaces for all those women who do not fit the world's definition of 'good' women.

So far as women's movements are concerned, we have, by and large, concentrated on the rights of those who lived by the norms laid down by society. Women who have relationships outside of marriage—monogamous or multiple, with whomever they wanted to; women who choose to acknowledge, express and act on their desire; women who choose to sell their bodies and look at sex work as a profession going beyond the notions of violence that prostitution was understood to be; women who challenge the very basic norms and structures of how society thinks that women should behave—talking of rights for all these women is a difficult task.

Acknowledging their existence could be interpreted as endangering the movements of and for the 'good' women. But feminism is not about maintaining status quo. It is about challenging all oppressive structures of society. Looking at 'bad' women will in fact help us voice exactly the nature of control over women's sexuality and to relook at all institutions anew. And these processes have begun in at least small sections of the women's movements that have started engaging with all those marginalised by mainstream society.

Understanding lives of women who question the whole notion of femininity in multiple ways has implications for the ways in which we have understood and worked with gender so far. 'Women' who pass as men—either because they do not have ways in which to understand their desire

for women or because their bodies truly do not fit the gender 'woman'; 'persons' who go through immense pain and suffering to actually alter their bodies, who are willing to pay all the costs for it in every form merely because this world does not allow them the freedom to be who they are; 'men' who wish to cross-dress and not act as men; all those who find the generic terms 'men' and 'women' inadequate to define who they are—complicate our understandings of gender in ways that looking at the categories of 'women' and 'men' cannot!

Patriarchy is about inequality in relations, it is about power. Looking at the sex and gender divide, we did question the societal structures that gave rise to these unequal power relations. It is an understanding that helps us even today to recognise the structures of power in society. It helped us open up the notions of being men and women to an extent. Gender roles have been questioned and we have tried to open the watertight compartments of male and female to some limited extent. For many years, however, we lived with the complacency of sex as a biological reality and 'woman' as a given category. We lived without actually questioning whether all bodies had to necessarily fit into being male or female only.

Working with queer realities has, however, opened a whole new way of looking at sex and gender. People who do not identify as male or female clearly, or those who do not identify with the gender categories, or those that identify with one sex and gender but are not comfortable with the watertight definitions of these genders—there are many kinds of people and many kinds of realities. All these realities demand humanity, space and rights within this society. More importantly they raise questions for all of us. Why are there only two sexes? Why are there only two genders? Why is there a one-to-one correspondence between a particular sex and a particular gender?

And then comes the key question. Is compulsory heterosexuality only about controlling desire or is it also about dictating that the world can have only two kinds of people—women and men? Does it expand the meaning of hetero-normativity to an extent that we are just about beginning to comprehend? Does this not raise new ways of looking at the notion of family? And if we accept that there can be more ways in which people could define themselves, then what does this do to our understanding of feminism, to our recently reclaimed category of 'woman'? How are we going to be able to accept the privilege and power of the naturally born woman over all those who do not fit?

I must admit that raising these questions has not been easy. The first time in our discussions when I was asked to really answer the question, 'what is it that makes me a woman?', I resisted very hard. Being a woman and claiming

this body and this identity as a positive identity was something that I and others like me had just recently learnt. The women's movement had helped us do this. To question it is not easy. In the kind of world that we live in, where even being a woman is so difficult and where the category 'woman' has constantly been under attack, it is not easy to let it go and accept the fluidity of gender. And yet as a lesbian woman, living, working and interacting with many women for whom these are not just theoretical questions—this understanding has given an insight into hetero-normativity that has made me understand many aspects of my life and the world around me much better.

The women's movements were the first to articulate concern over the control over sexuality and the societal constructions of gender and are hence the closest link and support for the nascent 'queer' movements in the country. Queer political movements also have to work within the feminist frameworks questioning patriarchy. We have to be together and in the forefront of the struggle against hetero-normativity and patriarchy. We have to learn to theorise and politicise together but strategise in ways that shall take into account our individual and specific realities in this vastly unequal and lop-sided world.

Notes

1. A collective of lesbian and bisexual women formed in April 1995 and earlier known as Stree Sangam.
2. Forum Against Oppression of Women was formed in 1980 as the Forum Against Rape and has since functioned in Mumbai in its members' houses with voluntary work put in by numerous women over the years. It has chosen consciously to remain a non-registered, non-funded, autonomous collective, a breed of organisations that is fast becoming extinct with the pressures of a globalised society. It began as a campaign group and has worked on various issues in the last two-and-a-half decades of its existence.
3. Till 1982, while the local trains had 'ladies only' compartments it was so only till eight in the evening. It was after a sustained campaign by the Forum where we actually 'guarded' two trains twice a week against the entrance of men for a month and then negotiated with the authorities, that one compartment per train was made '24 hours for ladies only'.
4. During December 1987, there were a series of press reports covering the marriage of Leela and Urmila, two police constables in Bhopal, who were discharged from service for 'conduct unbecoming to public servants'. Several women's groups conducted a signature campaign for their reinstatement into service.
5. I must admit that I feel such a dual sense of belonging and separation from the larger women's movements that I cannot avoid this fluctuating use of 'we'.

Sometimes it is for all those who are perceived to belong and at other times for those perceived to not belong.

6. I must admit that meeting many women also did the same to my sensibilities. In the absence of a lexicon it was almost as if the roles of 'man' and 'woman' were both being played to the hilt. As we sometimes wondered, at times relationships between two women were more heterosexual than those between some women and men that we knew. There was a successful mangling of both notions of gender and sexuality—the mainstream and the newly emerging feminist one as well.

References

Scripts, Vol. 3, October 2003, p. 3.

10

Voicing the Invisible

Violence Faced by Lesbian Women in India

Bina Fernandez and *Gomathy N.B.*

Lesbians are vulnerable to the violence faced by all women—rape, battering, sexual harassment and child abuse. However, lesbians not only have to contend with violence *as women*, but also *as lesbians*.[1] This is comparable to the specific kinds of violence women face on the basis of their identities as Dalit or adivasi. There are significant differences though.

First, the epistemic root of the violence faced by lesbians is in the denial of their very existence in Indian society. Lesbianism is often decried as a 'Western import', and allegedly restricted to the urban élite of Indian society. However, the indisputable evidence of same-sex love in different historical contexts[2] in India (the *Kama Sutra* and Khajuraho temple carvings being two commonly cited examples), and the increasing number of news reports from small towns and rural locations of women attempting to marry other women, are facts that contradict these oft-repeated denials of lesbian existence.

Second, lesbian sexuality is not necessarily immediately apparent from the woman's name, physical features or social practices, and a woman can choose (or not) to reveal her sexual orientation. Some women might indicate their sexual orientation through subversion of gender by adopting 'masculine' clothes and behaviour. Other lesbian women may simply state that their relationship is more than a friendship. Many lesbian women may choose to *not* indicate their sexual orientation at all. In such instances, unlike in the case of caste or religion (where name, outward appearance and/or behaviour are often signifiers of identity), lesbian women are not 'identifiable'.