

panchayats of Uttar Pradesh. Till the end of 1985 there were as many as 4,058 recognised van panchayats in these five districts of UP. The tradition of van panchayats in the northern districts of Almora, Pithoragarh, Nainital, Paurigarhwal and Chamoli is age old. Mobilisation of people in this region to participate in forest resource management could be traced back to 1916 [Ballabh and Singh 1988:3] when the Kamaon Association was formed for the purpose. People had acquired management rights over class-I forests as early as 1931 [Ballabh and Singh 1988] and simultaneously forest panchayat rules were enacted for the region although these rules have been augmented and modified from time to time. The concept of van panchayats has born out of the ongoing tussle between the popular demand to get back their rights and the state monopoly over forests. Hence, community-based forest management practices of Orissa have great resemblance with the van panchayat system of UP, at least in the context of their genesis, as both are results of self-initiated collective action.

The rights of people over forests in UP hills are well defined [Ballabh and Singh 1988:10] whereas in Orissa there prevails confusion even today. The van panchayats in UP have been functioning as part of the district revenue administration under the district magistrates and are structurally integrated to the district administration through subdivisional magistrates and forest panchayat inspectors. At village level, the van panchayat committee is headed by the sarpanch. This is altogether a different scenario compared to the community-based forest management practices of Orissa which still continue to be largely voluntary and people resist the involvement of the state administration in their efforts to protect forests. In UP the van panchayats have rights over only class-I forest, not over class-II forests (reserved) while in Orissa the VFPCs protect both protected and reserved forests. In UP both the revenue department and the forest departments are administratively involved with the van panchayats, while in Orissa it is only the forest department trying to involve itself with the community-based management of forests despite popular resistance.

The van panchayats make their own rules, as the VFPCs in Orissa do, for regulating the use of patches and for utilising the forest produces. Similar to the 'Thengapali' practices in Orissa, there prevails a practice called 'Muasawari' in van panchayat villages. The study of Ballabh and Singh (1988:14-23) talked of no conflict, implying absence of inter/intra village conflict, which is in fact rampant in Orissa. Serious intra village conflicts are absent among the van panchayats obviously because these are represented by different castes by law. Moreover, most of these villages are single caste villages. Inter

village conflicts are not observed for the obvious reason that the van panchayats are part of the district administration. The other striking feature of van panchayats is that some of them are exclusively managed by women.

However, it is clear that for the restoration of ecology and sustainability of the forest resources, involvement of the adjacent beneficiary communities is inevitable. It also becomes evident that participatory management approach is immensely effective in increasing the bio-mass production in the naturally regenerating forests, thereby meeting the fuelwood, fodder, timber and other forest produce needs of the community. But it also raises a further question, is participatory approach the panacea for development questions?

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DISCUSSION

Natural Is Not Always Rational

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VIMAL BALASUBRAHMANYAN'S article, 'Gay Rights in India' (*EPW*, February 3), deals with the topic in complete ignorance of the social dimension of the sexual relations. Far from solving the problems of the homosexuals, her prescriptions only help in rationalising and justifying the archaic and decadent sexual practices in society. Unlike in animals, where sexual instinct is basically a biological response, in the case of human beings the desire for sex is governed both by the body and the mind. The human psyche plays a very significant role in channelising sexual instincts in man to enable him to involve actively in social production, an activity without which the human species cannot exist. In the course of his interaction with nature, man has learnt to pattern his sexual instincts and sublimate the libido in more productive and creative work. The forms of sexual relations changed with changes in the structure of social production. That different types of sexual relations existed at a primitive stage of social development is a fact known to all historians and anthropologists. Why speak of homosexual relations alone, multiple forms of heterosexual relations, such as incest, polygamy and polyandry also enjoyed social sanctity at one time, as they were compatible with the social needs of that particular stage of human society. However,

what was acceptable and permissible at one stage, becomes backward and reactionary at an advanced stage of social development. That was the reason why much before the appearance of class exploitation and gender domination, clan societies themselves gave up the practice of incest and polyandry. More than men, it was women who first felt the need for monogamous relations. The changing material conditions of social production started favouring monogamous relations. Class societies which emerged with the development of private property only utilised the monogamous relations which had already started evolving as instruments for social reproduction of private property and institutionalised class exploitation and gender oppression.

Coming to homosexuality, we do not have enough evidence as to whether primitive clan societies, which had not yet witnessed the power structures based on class and gender domination, also had homosexuals of the kind we see in the contemporary world. Barring hermaphrodites and persons with abnormal hormone compositions inheriting some features of the other sex, in all other cases homosexuality has more to do with one's psyche, rather than physiology. Although homosexual tendencies are visible during childhood, in the course of the process of socialisation most

people overcome them and accept heterosexual relations, as they enter adulthood. Only in exceptional cases do some people remain at the stage of homosexuality for a variety of reasons. Particular factors that make a person homosexual may differ from person to person. But in general the continuation of homosexual urges, both in men and women, beyond teenage appears to be a reaction to dominant-subordinate relations and also to phobias and complexes associated with strict gender differentiation in the male-dominated class societies. Normally homosexual tendencies find ventilation in those communities or groups of people which have been denied access to healthy heterosexual relations for a long time. Among poor working populations where people marry at a very young age and also in those families where children do not experience any gender bias or preference, homosexual tendencies are rarely visible. As there are no physical disabilities compelling them to cling to homosexuality, many of them can become heterosexuals if they are determined to change their sexual behaviour. In a society where monogamy has emerged as the dominant form of sexual relations, homosexuals who fail to change their sexual preferences or who prefer to continue the same for one or the other reasons cannot escape social ostracism. They have to live constantly in fear and suffer from guilt and humiliation.

Instead of examining the development of different forms of sexual relations from the historical perspective and accounting for the causes that make some hold on to homosexuality, Vimal Balasubrahmanyam (VB) pleads for scrapping of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and the recognition of all forms of sexual relations as normal. To argue her case, she quotes the resolutions made in a meeting of the not-so-well-known association named, the AIDS Bhedhav Virodi Andolan (ABVA), which tried to give intellectual justification to the practice of homosexuality on historical and medical grounds. In reality such arguments have no social relevance. That homosexual relations enjoyed social sanction at one point of time will not automatically make this practice rational and desirable in the present conditions. Does VB expect us to continue obnoxious social practices such as the caste system, sati and polygamy, just because they had the approval of our "the culture, heritage and even religion"? Similarly, the opinions of medical and psychiatric associations also make little sense as they look at homosexuality only from the clinical point of view, whereas social scientists have the responsibility of examining individual behaviour from the viewpoint of its relevance to society at large. Freud may be right when he said that at a particular stage of

development of individual personality, the child gets sexually attracted towards the parents. Such attractions between the brothers and sisters also appear normal to the psychoanalysts. But should these findings be used to justify and promote incest in society?

Further VB makes use of an isolated incident in Tihar jail, where a prisoner died from AIDS, to claim that the state denies the rights of homosexuals. Here her main argument appears to be that a supply of condoms is denied to the prisoners, as pointed out by the ABVA. She does not seem to have anything against the prison system which deprives prisoners of the rights for heterosexual relations for years together. She seems to be worried only because safe conditions for homosexual relations are not ensured in prisons. Here she ignores the simple fact that more than 90 per cent of the prisoners who are compelled to indulge in homosexual acts would opt for heterosexual relations if they were not in prisons. What happens to people in abnormal situations, as in prisons, barracks, harems, etc, cannot become a justification for practice in normal conditions.

To fight for solving the genuine problems of the homosexuals is one thing and to argue for recognition of freedom of sex is altogether a different thing. Rights are general conditions for the development of the individuals as well as society. No society can guarantee absolute right to freedom of sex for individuals. Individual freedom in any society is determined by the social relations and the social necessities of that given stage of social development. Demanding social recognition of sexual preferences not compatible with social necessity amounts to asking for a privilege, not a right. Before expecting progressive sections to support the cause of the homosexuals, VB should explain whether, apart from demanding sexual freedom, the gay and lesbian movements have been playing any emancipatory role in the society. There is no doubt that there are many contradictions and much hypocrisy in the practice of monogamous relations in class societies. But homosexuality is no solution to the problems of monogamy. Healthy sexual relations lie not in discarding monogamy, but in fighting for material conditions which make genuine monogamous relations based on love and gender equality possible. Homosexuals do not seem to have any such goals on their agenda. They reproach monogamy as practised in the west, but continue their bourgeois lifestyle in other aspects of life. Hence notwithstanding their anti-establishment rhetoric, they remain a stream within the moribund bourgeois civilisation. If that is the reality, VB should tell us why progressive sections and civil liberties organisations should back such movements.

This is, however, not to say that the homosexuals do not have rights although they are not entitled to any special privileges which others do not enjoy. But at the same time, they should not be discriminated against and deprived of the rights guaranteed to all citizens, just because they are homosexuals. To the extent, their rights as human beings are deprived, civil liberties organisations should take up this task. But does VB have this in mind, when she talks of the rights of the homosexuals?

VB deplores that the Right and the Left appear to have become one when it comes to denying the rights of the homosexuals. But in reality, despite legal sanctions, the decadent bourgeoisie of the late 20th century are encouraging all deviant forms of sexual relations, including homosexuality, through pornographic literature and blue films. Thanks to so-called globalisation of the communication media, villagers in India can also get 'inspiration' by watching the demonstrations of the gays and the lesbians in the western countries. School-going children in the urban areas, who do not know anything about growing poverty, unemployment and industrial unrest in the world, have become knowledgeable enough to name the tennis player who participated in a public rally organised by the homosexual activists.

Marxists, however, are nowhere near to this 'ideal society'. In letter and spirit, they stand for heterosexual, monogamous relations and proscribe all deviant forms of sexual relations, including homosexuality. They are not ignorant of the fact that different deviant forms of sexual relations are practised clandestinely in society alongside monogamy. But Marxists are no positivists to profess that what exists today are real, natural and therefore also desirable. Everywhere they promote only that which is progressive and in conformity with social necessity. It is not prejudice or moralistic considerations, but the backward and reactionary nature of these relations, which make Marxists oppose homosexual relations. By that it does not mean that Marxists do not take cognisance of the problems of hermaphrodites and persons with biological imbalances. In case of other categories, since it is the psyche, not physiology, which makes them homosexuals, Marxists try to change sexual behaviour through education, socialisation, advocacy and if necessary, psychiatric treatment. Marxists are no bourgeois psychoanalysts to believe that all individual aberrations can be overcome, while keeping the society as it is. They work at both individual and societal levels. Even after all these efforts, if some people, much against public conscience, take to the streets on the plea that they have the right to gratify their sexual urges in any way they like, Marxists do not hesitate to use force against such homosexual activists.