

Marxism, Radical Feminism and Homosexuality

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WHEN I reacted to Vimal Balasubramanian's position on 'Gay Rights in India' (*EPW*, February 3, 1996), I knew that I was opening a Pandora's box. As expected my article, 'Natural Is Not Always Rational' (*EPW*, April 13, 1996) met with critical responses from different quarters, each one widening the sphere of discussion to many other related issues. In *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)* itself two articles appeared confuting my arguments. While Sharmila Rege (*EPW*, June 1, 1996) tried to portray my interpretation as "one more piece in a mainstream homophobic tradition", Suneetha (*EPW*, November 23, 1996) concluded it was "an ill-informed and authoritarian exposition from a self-styled Marxist". Although my criticism of Vimal Balasubramanian was never based on medical or moralistic grounds, both Sharmila Rege and Suneetha quoted the opinions of American psychiatrists and cited different anthropological works to prove that there was nothing abnormal about homosexuals and that homosexuality was in practice in all cultures. Both of them raised objections to what they considered as orthodox-deterministic Marxian logic of subordinating sex to the needs of the society and argued in favour of "freedom of choice" in sexual matters. On her part, by reducing Marxist understanding of social necessity to reproduction of species and by interpreting reproduction as mere procreation, Suneetha defended technological changes that have "loosened the link between sexuality and reproduction" and argued that this "progressive step" would enable women and men "to break out of the boundaries that patriarchy imposes on the expression of their sexuality". Following similar logic, taking support from different western scholarly works, Sharmila Rege justified that gay and lesbian movements have potentiality to "reorganise heterosexuality" and that they could even pose "a challenge to capitalist system". Even though I am not in agreement with many of these and other conclusions which my critics have come to, I recognise that the issues they raised regarding sexuality, social control, sexual choice, women's emancipation and gender equality are relevant to the theory and practice of Marxism. I admit that classical Marxist literature does not have ready-made answers to all questions raised by post-modernists and feminists today, but I firmly believe that Marxism, as an analytical tool, has the capacity to comprehend and analyse the complex interplay of sex, gender and class in capitalist and socialist societies. Exposing some of the factual errors and

theoretical inadequacies of feminist and post-modernist interpretations of sexuality, in this paper I will try to justify my earlier position that forms of expression of sexuality were and are always subordinate to social necessity.

AMERICAN PSYCHIATRY AND JUSTIFICATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Let me begin my response with the premise from which my critics started their arguments to justify homosexuality as normal behaviour. It is true that American Psychiatric Association has removed homosexuality from the list of 'sick'. In the given social set up, where getting out of homosexual relationships becomes a problematic, interpreting homosexuality as a normal behaviour has a positive effect, in the sense that it helps homosexuals to overcome their guilt feelings and accept the way they are. While recognising the need for such a stand, one should not ignore the value premises on which the western psychiatrists base their conclusions. While appreciating the contributions of scholars like Wolbarst, Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, Wardel Pomeroy, etc, who have broadened our understanding of human sexual behaviour, we should not overlook the fact that they all examined sexual behaviour basically from a clinical point of view and that their main concentration is individual and not society. In fact their justification of homosexuality as normal behaviour is based on the assumption that anything based on mutual consent and not aimed at harming others is acceptable and permissible [Ellis 1959, Fast 1975]. This assumption is based on liberal bourgeois notion that a person is free to do anything as long as he does not touch another's nose.

To interpret that which is normal for individual is also normal for the society is to fall into the trap of bourgeois individualism which reduces society to a sum total of separate and unconnected individuals. In reality the society is much more than an individual and it has its own structure and logic guiding its development. It is, therefore, unsound to judge social attitudes towards sexual behaviour purely on the basis of individual point of view. If what is normal for individual is considered normal even for society, then according to this logic many other sexual practices, like incest, urolognia, caprolognia, fetichism, zoophilia, exhibitionism and sado-masochism, etc, should also be accepted as normal and all those who abhor such practices should be branded as phobiacs or as arrogant creatures. Basing themselves blindly on American psychiatry,

our petty bourgeois advocates of human rights may become magnanimous enough to tolerate and accommodate all such sexual practices in their dream land, but society can have its own logic in allowing or not allowing such sexual practices.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND PRIMITIVE CULTURES

The authors attempting to rationalise homosexuality on the basis of anthropological studies usually overlook the fact that sexual freedom was never absolute even in primitive societies. There hardly exists a culture in history which did not impose some kind of restrictions on sexual expression or behaviour of its members. Anthropology speaks of several prohibitions, taboos and myths with regard to incest, menstruation, pregnancy and child birth in different cultures. It is possible that some cultures are tolerant of homosexuality, but even they had their norms, regulations and justifications. For example, although male members belonging to Itamul and Arapesh communities involve in homosexual acts with persons belonging to other tribes, they desist from such acts within their own communities [Mead 1954:58]. The Trobrianders accept sex as a natural instinct, yet they ridicule and discourage the practice of homosexuality. They feel homosexual acts among men as unclean because of its association with the excreta [Seward 1954:87]. Among the Keraki Indians of Southern New Guinea homosexuality is seen as a stage towards mature heterosexual relations. The Sambians may organise initiation ceremonies encouraging homosexuality among men [Herd 1981], but we can also see the Marind Anim community organising special rituals to initiate men into the heterosexual relationships out of the fear that their people may not find heterosexuality sufficiently rewarding to indulge in it. Degree of tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality differs from one culture to another, but there is hardly a tribal community which has not recognised the need for heterosexuality to foster genetic process of growth around which their group life revolves.

Further, while referring to these cultures, one should not ignore geographical, social, economic and demographic factors conditioning these communities. Social attitudes regarding sexual practices vary from culture to culture, and from one stage of development to the other. What was essential and permissible in one culture at one stage of development, may not be acceptable to the people of other cultures at a different stage of development. In such situations we need to judge sexual taboos and attitudes on the basis of whether they retard or contribute to the progress of the communities as a whole at a given point of history. Feminists and gay activists who cite existence of homosexual practices in certain tribal cultures

need to answer whether the culture in which we live today has anything to do with those primitive cultures. Will those who romanticise and appreciate social acceptance of homosexuality in those societies give up all the comforts that modern civilisation provides to them and prefer to lead a subsistent living? When that is not possible, it is better we stop referring to anthropological studies in a selective way and confine our discussions to its relevance in the given historical context.

FAMILY AND SEXUALITY

Sharmila Rege tried to convince readers that the real causes of homosexuality are not yet known to science. Indeed scholars are divided in their opinions as to whether homosexuality is congenital or acquired. Those who believe in congenital theories lay stress on genetic factors and hormonal imbalances and argue that a homosexual remains a homosexual forever. Others who think that homosexuality is acquired, emphasise the process of socialisation and individual experiences in the development of sexual orientations. Psychiatrists like Dr Pomeroy worked on the assumption that both personality and environmental factors shape homosexual orientation in a person [Fast 1975:254]. Different studies made on homosexuals revealed that their sexual orientation is the result of many factors such as accidents of upbringing, close-binding or dominating mothers, weak or absent fathers, child's identification with wrong parent, excessive fear of the parent of opposite sex, traumatic sexual experiences and lack of opportunities for hetero-sexual contacts [Seward 1954; Schwarz 1958; Connell 1995]. It was, however, pointed out that in certain cases one can see homosexual tendencies even in those persons who did not experience any of the above mentioned situations. What actually drove such people towards homosexuality is yet to be ascertained. This limitation, however, does not negate the significance of earlier studies. Just as the hypothesis that smoking causes cancer does not become invalid just because all smokers do not end up with cancer and all those who suffer from cancer need not necessarily be smokers, the absence of explanation with regard to certain categories of homosexuals does not automatically invalidate earlier assumptions about homosexuality.

Many feminists and psychiatrists laid stress on environmental factors rather than congenital factors and family is being seen as a site where sexual orientations among the children are shaped. Now there is a broad agreement among the scholars that oedipal (Freudians) and pre-oedipal (Chodorow, Jane Flax) experiences are instrumental in shaping sexual orientation and gender consciousness among the people. It is probable that these tensions exist even in the clan societies where there exists some kind of division of labour along sex lines. But it would be simplistic

to argue that all kinds of families based on heterosexuality, are oppressive and biased towards men. The classic works of Morgan and Bachofen have given enough insights into the nature of families and the status of women in the primitive societies. Even Malinowski (1927 and 1932) and Margaret Mead (1954 and 1963) account of the life pattern of the aboriginal groups like the Marquesans, the Arapesh, the Cannibal Mundugumor, the Tchambuli show that the women enjoy a respectable position *vis-a-vis* men and that the gender roles are not strictly defined to prevent women from involving in social production and men from the responsibility of child care. In such families oedipal and pre-oedipal tensions are easily manageable. Only with the birth of patriarchy which coincides with the development of private property that the family system turned oppressive and became a means for the reproduction of class and gender inequalities. It is only in the patriarchal families that child care became the exclusive concern of women, whose position was, by then, devalued within a family and also in the society. When the child is brought up in such families based on gender differentiation, it cannot avoid rigid oedipal and pre-oedipal tensions. The process of socialisation helps majority of them to conform to heterosexual norms and accept the gender specified roles, as ordained by the society. But this process may fail to work in the case of a few individuals, who because of congenital or acquired factors, or sometimes, due to a combination of both, exhibit homosexual tendencies. One can call such persons deviants, not because they exhibit any pathological tendencies, but because they could not conform to the norms of the society. The more oppressive the patriarchal family turns, the greater the scope of such deviant behaviour in the society. The growth of nuclear families that followed the development of capitalism has further aggravated the problem of sexuality. Some feminists rightly understood that this problem can be overcome if the father takes equal responsibility in child care and household work and mother gets equal access to the world outside. Conscious and enlightened persons should make attempts to create such a family atmosphere for their children. When the child gets attention of both parents and grows up without any gender bias, it can overcome oedipal and pre-oedipal complexes, typical of patriarchal family system, without much difficulty. Even if the child develops sexual attraction towards the same sex in such families, in the absence of oppression and inequalities associated with patriarchy, it would not be difficult to change the sexual orientation of the persons. But it needs to be kept in mind that in the present society dominated by patriarchal values, existing method and quality of child care cannot be radically changed without destroying the material and ideological foundations of

patriarchy. This limitation makes the task of fighting against capitalism as a primary condition for overcoming patriarchy in all its forms.

FEMINISM AND HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

It follows from the above that apart from natural biological reasons, the sexual orientations and attitudes are the results of historically conditioned familial, social and psychological situations. At no point of time in history, not even in promiscuity, man could place sex above societal needs. Every culture provides opportunities for gratification of sexual instincts within certain limits. What exactly the limits would be, are decided by social, economic, geographical and demographic compulsions of the given society. Sexual taboos, myths and prohibitions were present in all cultures. However, stupid and harsh some of them might appear to be to the people of the present generation, one should not forget that they were reflections of social needs at one point of time. It would be wrong to see society as something external to man. Society is as natural and as essential to man as his physical impulses. As a member of the society, it becomes essential for man to pattern and channelise his libido and involve in social production without which he cannot live as a man. As the civilisation advances, organised sex life becomes a norm in all societies.

Radical feminists and gay activists are right in saying that heterosexuality was imposed on man, who is otherwise bisexual in nature. But here they conveniently ignore the fact that the force was applied not only for controlling homosexual behaviour, but also in checking different heterosexual practices such as incest, polyandry and polygamy. It is not force *per se*, but the context in which and the purpose for which the force was applied, which need explanation. Answering this question, some radical feminists came out with fatuous theories according to which homosexuality was forcibly controlled by men who wanted to exercise physical supremacy over women's bodies and lives [Rich 1980; Daly 1979]. Without trying to historicise the conditions wherein men intended to and became capable of controlling women, they talk as if men are oppressive and anti-women in all societies. Earlier, although they are critical of Marxists, who they think have not realised the significance of sexuality, radical feminists did not ignore the relevance of class as a unit of analysis. But in course of time, sexuality became such an obsession to them that certain groups of feminists, who later proclaimed themselves as lesbian feminists or cultural feminists, totally ignored the need to fight against private property that institutionalises patriarchy and gender oppression. Characterising heterosexuality as a reactionary institutional structure imposed on women to maintain the male supremacy, some of them started characterising all heterosexuals as

