

Sociocultural Constructions of Sexuality in South Asia

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This short introduction focuses on the historical and constructed nature of sexuality, on the normative aspects of the discourses that develop around it, as well as on its inevitable entanglements with issues of societal control, power relations, and violence. It aims to show how the papers in the present panel converge in highlighting the multifaceted and polymorphic role of various South Asian discourses on sexuality in their attempted 'construction' of a normed individual as the basic building block of the society envisioned by the authors of those very discourses.

The driving idea behind this section of the proceedings and behind the panel that originated it can be sketchily expressed in the following, working axiom: In any cultural milieu, any discourse on sexuality is a historical and social construct, which –more often than not– embeds in itself an understanding of itself and of sexuality as natural objects, paradoxically independent of any history and culture.

On the premises of this historical and constructive nature of sexuality as ideology –both on a personal, psychological level and on a shared, social level–, this section of the proceedings aims at showcasing a selected number of instances of discourses on sexuality gleaned from the history of South Asia, expressed in different cultural media, and expressive of different historical and social milieus. A clear reference point in using this interpretive framework and this charged terminology is Foucault's intellectual enterprise and his call for scholarship to develop an 'analytics' of power through which sexuality might be better understood, a micro-analysis of how power controls sex by laying down rules for it to follow, normally within a background of self-understanding that masks the intentions of hegemonic classes by disguising the necessity of obedience as beneficial and indispensable to maintaining law and order. In the phrase 'discourse of sexuality', the issues of gender identities, gender relations, and gendered effects of power, i.e. the crucial focus of gender studies, cannot but occupy centre stage. Nevertheless, the term 'gender' is extremely heavy and viscous with a decades-long debate whose dust has not yet settled down, rather constantly stirred up by a muddled plurality of religious and political agendas, often aiming at blurring the carefully drawn and constantly re-negotiated differences between gender roles, sexual orientations and biological sexes that have occupied both the scholarly debate and the public domain of Western post-industrial

society. For this very reason, the choice of an overall title that does not explicitly mention the term 'gender' wishes to be paradigmatic in its attempt to turn the attention to the very practices of sexuality and all the possible modes through which they are normed, i.e., not only by way of gender polarization, but also through any other set of normative criteria and practical restrictions that might be used to curb, for instance, the uncontrolled force of Eros, commonly feared as being potentially disruptive of social and political stability.

In view of the generally accepted scholarly necessity to step out of the categories and value judgements that the various cultural traditions tend to naturalize, the methodological and heuristic foci are meant to be on the analysis of the tensions within and without the data under scrutiny, especially in the attempt to exhume the dynamics of power and knowledge that harbour the rationale of any discursive practice, and to unearth the practical and theoretical violence inherent in any attempt at naturalizing and universalizing normative conceptions of human behaviour and self-understanding. Therefore, on the assumption that any kind of discourse is at least implicitly normative, a central issue tackled by the papers in this section is the following: how far the discourses on sexuality throughout South Asian history and cultures have been a tool to construct the individual, to create a subject, and to constitute a specific kind of identity and the consequently ensuing form of society. In Foucauldian jargon, the issue consists in the origination of individuality as the product of the power/knowledge technology that is sexuality.

Against some of Foucault's somewhat brisk insights, however, the following papers show, for instance, how the attempt to disinter the truth of sex as the innermost core of the individual, mainly understood and conceptualized as such due to sexual choices —along with its possible corollary that sexuality is to be considered as a privileged locus for the identification of deep meaningfulness— is not at all a phenomenon peculiar to the West, let alone peculiar to the West after the 18th or the 19th century (see, for instance, the centrality of chastity and asceticism in many strands of South Asian traditions). Against what, according to some of his critics, could be defined as Foucault's disregard for the capacity of the individual to act, resist and change the grid laid down by the ubiquitous mechanisms of power, two of the following papers (Bevilacqua and Lorea) highlight that very agency and the creatively interpretive capacity of single, historical individuals, who have variously negotiated novel forms of self-determination against the backdrop of the dominant understandings of sexuality.

It is customary of prefatory essays to go over the various papers being introduced and to direct the spotlight on the most fundamental aspects and challenges being tackled by them. This cursory but hopefully significant sampling of cases from South Asia starts with the Vedic period, focusing on

an instance of the conceptualization of gender polarity and its relation to power in the most solemn amongst the Vedic rituals. Marianna Ferrara shows how the religious construction of female sexuality and its implicit link to fertility is intertwined with the conferral of masculine authority to the patrons of Vedic rituals on the part of the very religious practitioners who authored the ritual texts prescribing the aforementioned rites. Moreover, she shows how royal sexuality cannot but be interpreted as a central point of contention between religious and political elites as well as a field of tension and negotiation that actually turns into a metonymy for the field of power itself, especially insofar as the control over the sexual life of the political elite is ultimately equivalent to the control over their reproduction, i.e. over succession, and therefore the control over the reproduction of power itself.

The section continues with a paper by Daniela Bevilacqua who takes the reader up to the contemporary world of South Asia and its orders of Hindu renouncers, without however disregarding the historical trajectory of texts and lived religious experience that have shaped present-day practices and ideals. The focus of the essay is on the entitlement of women practitioners to become ascetics. Thus, through a methodology that is both historical and anthropological, she investigates the limitations suffered by women in their religious and social agency, especially insofar as the choice of an ascetic path would necessarily determine the break of brahmanically sanctioned norms of femininity, such as, for instance, complete dependence on and submission to the male order. Even more interestingly, the paper investigates how the choice of asceticism can become an instrument of “gender empowerment and a means of freeing women from the shackles of a patriarchal society”, although the carefully analysed phenomenon of the ‘motherisation of female asceticism’ seems to parade against the actuality of such a release from patriarchal norms. Moreover, the article is particularly enriched by its focus on the tangible *Erlebnis* of a contemporary female ascetic of the Rāmānandī tradition, whom the author met and interviewed during her fieldwork.

With the paper by Carola Erika Lorea, the chronological focus remains contemporaneous, but the geographical one shifts to the East, to the world of Bengali mystic practitioners and itinerant performers known as Bāuls. The enigmatic songs composed by the saint-songwriter Bhaba Pagla (1902 – 1984) are analysed as inherently and purposely polysemic. On the basis of an investigation deliberately grounded on their receptions by performers and devotees, the plethora of the songs’ meanings is organized along a threefold interpretive matrix. Starting with a first superficial, literal layer, through an exoteric devotion-centred hermeneutical middle ground, the esoteric depth culminates in a diversified overabundance of Tantric meanings (loosely understood) that are focused on the soteriological significance of “an anthropoietic sexuality based on the restraint of the senses,

especially of sexual desire, and the identification of sublimated carnal love with divine love.” At this monistic level, even the man–woman dichotomy recognised by the Bāuls as the only real difference amongst humans is ultimately overcome in a supreme experience of mystic/sexual unity brought about by techniques of control over reproductive substances and practices. Among many other reflections on the ratio of polysemy within the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Bāul songs, the paper provides an analysis of the various interpretations —conveniently polarized as ‘devotional’ or ‘tantric’ ones— as mirrors of diverging beliefs on the religious use of sexuality on the part of different social agents, who are furthering conflicting agendas of religious proselytism, social control and cultural identity.

The concluding paper of this section investigates the management of sexuality in a cultural medium of the 20th- and 21st-centuries: the glittering universe of Indian cinema. On the background of a cinematic history of the complex dialectics between the hardships of censorship and the representation of untamed eroticism, Tatiana Szurlej’s contribution is centred on the depiction of feminine sexuality in those crucial moments of Bollywood movies that are the item songs (or item numbers) and the dream sequences, both in the post-independence as well as in more recent developments, among the many ways of tricking censors into allowing the allure of Eros within the warp of cinema. The evolution of item songs is traced from their first introductions, when they were performed by ‘foreign’ vamps, epitomising the dichotomy between Hindu purity and Western lasciviousness, through the cinema in the seventies in which the female protagonists as well “started to be exposed like never before”, up to the many strands of later and contemporary movies, in which ‘excuses’ such as the Holi festival were common stratagems for vouchsafing the “voyeuristic pleasure to the viewer”. The item numbers evolve, so to say, in the dream sequences, in which the representation of sexuality is psychologically twice removed from reality by force of the ontological status of the scene, fictional even within the already fictional world of cinema. Tatiana Szurlej identifies one more evolution in the ‘film songs’ formula in the massive influence of the Indian star-system, due to which guest stars can just make their appearance in a movie where they play no other role than a beautiful dancing and singing body.

It is also more than worth mentioning that, on the occasion of the conference in Turin (4th–7th September 2013), Mrinal Kaul delivered an extremely rich paper on the interconnection between Hindu nationalism and the role of sexuality, thoroughly investigating the conceptualization of India as the chaste Bhārat Mātā, ‘Mother India’, and of the (often Muslim) ‘Other’ as a male molester with the wickedest of intentions, to be dutifully persecuted and severely chastised by the pure, Hindu protectors. Unfortunately, due to other scholarly commitments, Mrinal Kaul was not able to finalize his paper on time for the publication of these proceedings.

As previously warned against, the cursory nature of this sampling would have of course benefitted from an even larger spectrum of cases, cultural scenarios and diverse medias under scrutiny. For instance, an example from the uniquely hybrid Indo-Islamic civilization would have certainly enriched the depth of the hermeneutical gaze by including a further perspectival take on the issue, but there is no point in searching for an endless list of regretted omissions. The reason for hinting at matters not treated here is clearly just the desire to highlight the need for further similar volumes and projects, as the topic is far from being comprehensively dealt with by previous scholarship, let alone by our present contributions.

To conclude, the aim of the aim (the *prayojanaprayojana*, in the technical terminology of the Sanskrit commentarial tradition I fondly cherish) of this section cannot be but the development of an encompassing interpretive framework that could account for why, how and how successfully the various discourses on sexuality in South Asia have brought about both intended and unintended effects on history, society and individuals. One might well consider that the extent of the success with regard to this huge, unwieldy task is given away by the incapacity of this short preface to synthesize an overall picture or to pinpoint a specific result of sorts that undergirds the various contributions and approaches to the issue of sexuality in South Asia. However —let the incomplete nature of the scholarly enterprise be what it may— a central issue for any collection of articles is whether the contributors have anything interesting to say. And, in my opinion, the richness of the presented material, the understudied nature of the area, and the subtlety of the scholarly approaches that the various authors have displayed do already vouchsafe for this kind of success. But, more importantly, the following papers are being offered to the readers as a missing building block, hopefully a solid and well-shaped one, in the construction of that very encompassing interpretive paradigm for sexuality in South Asia, the search for which cannot yet be declared over (if it ever can), but whose flickering silhouette has now become less blurred.

After obtaining his Ph.D. from the University of Rome “La Sapienza” on Indian aesthetic theories, Daniele Cuneo worked at the Vienna University on Sanskrit Logic and at the Cambridge University in a project on Manuscript Studies. His main areas of expertise are Sanskrit philosophy of language and aesthetic thought, but his research branches out into epistemological and metaphysical disputes among Brahmins, Buddhists and Jains as well as their possible bearing on contemporary philosophical questions. He is the current Lecturer of Sanskrit and Ancient Culture of South Asia at Leiden University, the Netherlands. Visit his academia page for a complete list of publications.