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Indian Feminist Publishing and the Sexual Subaltern

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Abstract

The discussion of queer politics, identities and “sexual subalterns” in India has, after 2009, entered a new phase. Discourse on sexuality was once largely focused on law and health policies; now, such discourse is better able to address positive identities and their multitude of articulations. The relationship between queer and feminist discourse has become more productive. This article examines independent feminist publishers as a representative of Indian feminist discourse on sexuality and sexual subalternity. Such publishers are significant mediators of feminist scholarship and discourse, so analysing their work can reveal much about ‘mainstream’ forms of feminism. The December 2013 Supreme Court judgment to uphold Section 377 is concerning to many, but in the four and a half years that homosexuality was effectively legal in India, the visibility of the sexual subaltern broadened to the extent that it may be difficult to return to a pre-2009 state.

[**Keywords:** Indian feminism, Sexual Subaltern, Feminist Publishing, Queer literature, Section 377]

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalised “carnal intercourse against the order of nature”, usually interpreted as sodomy, was read down by the Delhi High Court in 2009. The Indian Supreme Court, in December 2013, overturned this judgment, effectually re-criminalising homosexuality. Section 377’s reading down was widely celebrated within the queer community as an important milestone, and the Supreme Court judgment lamented. But the four years in which homosexuality was in effect decriminalised saw large shifts in public awareness and acceptance of homosexuality, shifts that the judgment of the Supreme Court will likely have little effect upon.

This article suggests that the discussion of queer politics, identities and “sexual subalterns” has, after 2009, entered a new phase, one that is not primarily focused on law and health policies, but is able to look towards positive identities and their articulation in a variety of forms. Furthermore, the relationship between queer and feminist discourse has become more productive. I specifically examine independent feminist publishing outlets as a representative of Indian feminist discourse on sexuality and sexual subalternity. By ‘independent’, I mean groups that may or may not operate with not-for-profit status, but that are not owned by large publishing corporations, or are subject to the editorial intervention of individuals detached from the main operations of the group.¹

¹ It may be easy to assume that all ‘feminist’ presses or imprints are independent by virtue of the politics of their establishment—generally as an outlet for writers or perspectives that are underrepresented by the ‘mainstream’. However, the case of several British feminist presses in the 1980s—who were bought by larger corporations and subsequently subject to what could be considered unreasonable editorial interventions,

Such publishers are by no means the sole producers of feminist scholarship and discourse, but they are significant mediators of them, so analysing their work can reveal a lot about ‘mainstream’, urban forms of Indian feminism. While in the last decade or so, an increasing amount of online activism and publication has been occurring in India as elsewhere, such work falls outside the scope of this paper as that emerging media warrants a case study in its own right. Book publishing was a form of Indian feminist activism and knowledge production that began in the 1980s, and although it has always claimed to be at the forefront of progressive feminist knowledge production, the contradiction between this self-belief and its interactions with the “sexual subaltern” makes it a genre worthy of especial attention.

“Sexual subaltern” is a term coined by feminist legal scholar Ratna Kapur to refer to people outside heteronormative society. It includes, but is not limited to, sex workers, male and female homosexuals, transsexuals, and those living with HIV/AIDS. Sexual subaltern is shorthand for all people whose existence troubles the terms of mainstream discourse around sexual and gender identity and practice. Postcolonial feminism—within which much Indian feminism situates itself—draws heavily upon postcolonial and Subaltern Studies scholarship, yet neither have “brought an adequate account of gender or sexuality to its position”, and “have consistently failed to engage the sexual subaltern subject” (Kapur 2005, 28). Kapur uses subaltern not as a substitute for “minority”, but as a theoretical device that challenges normative assumptions about universality, neutrality and objectivity (2005, 3).

“Mainstream” Indian feminism largely dismissed or sidelined the sexual subaltern until relatively recently and, because of the long-term criminality of homosexuality and the continued controversial nature of sex work as a feminist issue, the work of queer-oriented feminist groups was constrained. The outbreak of HIV/AIDS in India in 1986 brought the sexual subaltern to the forefront of debates around sexuality, but it also created boundaries around what kinds of research and activism were prioritised: those with a health and regulatory focus were preferred. Post-2009, these parameters are shifting. With an estimated 2.5 million Indians currently living with the virus, HIV/AIDS is still a major priority for the government and NGOs when talking of sexuality, but the legalistic frameworks around which sexual subalterns organised prior to 2009 have opened up, creating more space for other identities and subjectivities (Kapur 2010, 102).

In a 1986 pamphlet outlining feminism’s relevance to South Asia, Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan proclaim: “Issues relating to sexual freedom, lesbianism, etc., raised by some western feminists have hardly ever been raised by us here” (6). For a long time there was the understanding that a distinction should be made between poverty and sexuality, the latter perceived to be imported from western feminist movements (Lomba

predicated upon profit margins—demonstrates that this assumption is not always the case. Simone Murray outlines these British cases in *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics*. Such cases have not occurred in India, however.

275). As feminist movements in India² grew and developed throughout the 1970s and '80s, homosexuality was rarely, if ever, discussed in left-wing, civil rights, feminist, or academic circles (Vanita 2004, 1). Mainstream Indian feminists considered sexuality a distraction from the more pressing concerns of illiteracy, poverty, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and the portrayal of women in the media (Achuthan et al, 36). A number of these other, so-called more urgent problems relate specifically to the control of female sexuality—domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, caste inequalities and property rights (Upadhyaya 3177).

In the 1980s the nascent Indian queer movement turned to feminists as natural allies, but generally found homophobia amongst the established leadership (Menon 2009, 98). Even when support was offered, it tended to be private in nature and did not initiate collective change (Sharma 2, 25). The fact that many urban-based, middle/upper-class feminists assumed heterosexuality to be normal is damaging to those lying outside. Chayanika Shah states that while instances of outright violence against lesbians are publicly condemned by mainstream feminists, the following individual responses to homosexuality, particularly lesbianism, have been common:

'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 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' (147).

The failure to question heterosexuality's constructed nature falls into the same trap that feminists challenge on other fronts—phallogocentrism that defines women only in relation to men, as opposite or complementary (Grosz 60). Questioning heteronormativity goes beyond recognising sexual subalterns as "also normal", and promotes *intersectionality* between queer and feminist discourse, rather than just *coalition* (Menon 1996, 101).

For a long time the only work that feminist publishers produced on sexuality was concerned with either maternal and reproductive health, or sexual violence. In much of the developing world, interventions into sexual behaviours were/are linked to national development (Simon-Kumar 24). Programmes for the control of India's growing population were informed by a fear of the "irresponsible promiscuities" of the poor (John and Nair 8), prompting the male sterilisation campaigns of 1975-77. By the 1980s a major shift occurred in family planning policy, away from men and towards women (John and

² No single, unified "Indian feminist movement" could be said to exist, now or at any time in the past. As with everything in India, regional, linguistic, religious, class and caste differences have had an effect upon feminist movements in the country. Much of the feminism discussed in this article is urban-based and middle/upper-class, using English as the language of communication. This author is not attempting to claim that this group is representative of all feminism in India; however, it is an influential, visible and important component of the overall movement, however unified or fractured that movement may be at various times.

Nair 20). Maternal and child health are combined with population control policies under the rubric of “reproductive health”. When combined with HIV/AIDS prevention, maternal and child health become known as “sexual health” policy. However, sexual and reproductive health are not the same, and a conflation of the two can neglect other sexuality. Rachel Simon-Kumar states that conventionally, mainstream discussions of population policy focus on programme design, service provision, availability and use of contraceptives, and put little emphasis on the rights and emancipation of the women concerned (22).

The other path that feminist studies of sexuality followed was that of sexual violence, focusing on rape or domestic violence, especially concerning dowry. A consolidating issue for the Indian feminist movement was the 1972 rape of a tribal girl, Mathura, while in police custody (Menon 2000, 69). From then, feminist debates revolved around men’s control of women’s sexuality, so rape, pornography, and prostitution were privileged. Assault was the only avenue for sexuality to enter into mainstream feminist consciousness (John and Nair 9). A related concern was the portrayal of women in the media, especially in advertising and film. Some feminists believed that censorship could be positive if it was used to limit degrading images of women. However, this reinforced the idea that sexuality was obscene, the answer being to treat women as asexual (Bose). These development- and violence-oriented approaches to sexuality have not disappeared, and much necessary work on them continues, but the late-1990s saw a turning point in attempts to broaden Indian feminist discourse on sexuality.

Deepa Mehta’s 1996 film *Fire* represents a paradigm-shifting moment in Indian lesbian activism and discourse. The plot of the film, and the controversy surrounding it, is well-known and needs no further rehearsal. What is pertinent here is that *Fire* was part of a broader trend that began in the 1990s of critiquing and altering stereotypical representations of homosexuals in film (Vasudevan 2). Stereotypes largely consisted of effeminate gay men acting as comical sidekicks, and butch female jail wardens who harassed female prisoners (Vasudevan 2). Literary representations of homosexuality, too, were rarely positive. When researching and collating writing for *Same-Sex Love in India*, Vanita and Kidwai found that almost every example of fiction depicting love between women was homophobic to some degree. As they write, “almost all Indian fiction we have found that depicts love between women does so with different degrees of homophobia, usually influenced by Western psychiatric discourse. Thus, lesbianism is often depicted as situational—caused by lack of access to men”, which they consider a pervasive form of homophobia (2000b, 203). In Indian literature, lesbian characters are often depicted as frustrated, sad, unloved, lonely, or doomed to commit suicide (Vanita and Kidwai 2000b, 204). Madness, neurosis, psychosis, and lesbianism have long been linked in literature (Hackett 459). As Vanita and Kidwai found, lesbianism or acts of same-sex desire were often presented as resulting from lack of access to men, and in societies where institutionalised heterosexuality is the norm, deviation from this can be considered a form of mental distress. Literary depiction of these qualities alone does not suggest an author’s homophobia, but it does contribute towards a narrow, negative image of

homosexuals, and reinforces compulsory heterosexuality by portraying lesbian experience as deviant, abhorrent or invisible (Rich 632).

A well-known example of a story by a woman writer on lesbianism is Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" ("Lihaaf" in Urdu), from 1941, which inspired *Fire* (Mehta and Ramaswamy 60). It is told by a child who recounts her aunt's sexual antics with her maidservant. The narrator is innocent of the true nature of the nightly encounters beneath the quilt, but she feels there is something sinister going on. Despite her confusion, it is clear to the reader what is really happening from descriptions such as the following:

The next night when I woke up, a quarrel between [aunt] Begum Jan and [maidservant] Rabbo was being settled on the bed itself. I could not make out what conclusion was reached, but I heard Rabbo sobbing. Then there were sounds of a cat slobbering in the saucer (13).

Lesbian sex is not overt, but the repetition of subtle images leave the reader in no doubt about what is happening beneath the quilt.

Readers and critics "unequivocally condemned" the story when it first appeared (Naqvi xi). Chughtai was charged with obscenity by the British government but, after a two-year trial, the case was dismissed after her lawyer argued that the story could not have a corrupting influence on "innocents" as only readers who had a prior understanding of lesbianism would understand its theme (Naqvi xii). Like *Fire*, "The Quilt" has been criticised by queer scholars for its depiction of homosexuality as situational rather than a positive choice (Vanita and Kidwai 2000b, 203). Begum Jan is hysterical and temperamental, prone to tantrums and a chronic itching of the skin. These details create the impression that she is not wholly sound of mind, accounting for her sexual "deviance". The recurring motif of the itch suggests more than the literal itching of Begum Jan's skin: "All her time was taken up with the treatment of her unfortunate itch" (Chughtai 12).

These negative stereotypes can also be seen in Malayalam/English author Kamala Das' 1988 story "The Sandal Trees". This is narrated by Sheela, an unhappily married middle-aged woman from a small town in Kerala, whose childhood friend and lover, Kalyanikkutty, unexpectedly reappears in her life. Kalyanikkutty is devious and disturbed, concurrently having an affair with her ex-husband Sudhakaran, seducing Sudhakaran's teenage daughter, and making passes at Sheela. Kalyanikkutty's attraction is described as a "magnetic field", and as well as reflecting a negative image of lesbians she is a stereotypical loose woman who corrupts with her powerful sexuality. "The Sandal Trees" exemplifies the acceptable and common ways of portraying female sexuality and sexual subalterns in literature prior to the last decade.

The change that has occurred since then was catalysed by *Fire*, representing a turning point in the intersection between mainstream feminism and lesbian activism. Sexuality topics once considered taboo were increasingly brought to attention, and the decade following *Fire* witnessed a strengthening of the Indian queer movement: the first

gay pride march was held in Kolkata in 1999, with subsequent ones held in Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Pondicherry from 2008. The reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2009 altered the terms of the debate again.

Arvind Narrain states that the emergent queer movement paradoxically owes a lot to Section 377. It was around its repeal that queer groups rallied, so after 2009 the way the movement campaigned, and what exactly it campaigned for, had had to alter (Narrain 52). Laws, and debates over them, establish circuits of communication between different establishments and social groups (Tambe 20). In challenging Section 377, the discourse produced became almost more important than the law itself. Concrete discursive developments took place within feminist and feminist-sympathetic discourse, suggesting that the sexual subaltern's social status is consolidating, little by little, even as the legal status remains shaky.

The shift in discourse after 2009 can already be seen in publications by Yoda Press, India's only formal press focusing on Queer Studies. Yoda has been described as consistently producing some of India's most progressive and insightful titles on gender and sexuality (Manchanda). Yoda's books published before 2009 begin with a call for a change in the law. Those published after 2009 begin to imagine a space for sexual subalterns *within* Indian society rather than at the margins of it. Even before the reading down of Section 377, queer scholar Gautam Bhan felt that it was dangerous to make queer activism synonymous with the legal challenge, as this promoted a narrow public face of the movement and limited its legitimacy in the eyes of the general public (47). Changes in broader society are more likely to be influenced by queer writing, films, and other cultural activities that raise the public profiles of queer, and other sexual subaltern, communities, than purely legally-focused activism.

A change can also be traced in feminist literary representations of the sexual subaltern, from a reticent mainstream one that viewed them with suspicion or hostility, to the development of "queer lit". Anthologies of stories are effective ways for publishers to "showcase" a variety of literature on a topic. Openly queer literature contrasts markedly with earlier examples of writing dealing with homosexuality, such as Das or Chughtai's work. For instance, Mumbai-based online bookseller Queer Ink, established in 2010 and run by lesbian activist and counsellor Shobhna Kumar, sells Indian books related to homosexuality of the sort Kumar had had difficulty purchasing in India (Advocate.com Editors). The site also has a writer's corner, which encourages queer writers to submit their work, described by Kumar as a "nurturing environment ... committed to unearthing new voices" (Advocate.com Editors). In 2013, Queer Ink published an anthology of queer writing titled *Out!: Stories from the New Queer India*.

A further example of a more self-consciously feminist queer alternative publishing outlet is *Scripts*, a zine produced by lesbian collective Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA) since 1998. *Scripts* include a variety of writing from the lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities, primarily in English but sometimes including other languages. The focus is varied, with special editions dedicated to politics, censorship, humour, travel. Much of the writing is experimental, or of the sort that may not be readily published

elsewhere. Numerous contributions are sexually explicit, with one edition carrying a story of lesbian erotica by “a self-styled erotic writer for married lesbian women” (Nagalakshmi 30). Some pieces are not overtly lesbian in content, but frankly question societal attitudes to sexuality. One short piece narrates a trip to the erotically-decorated temples of Khajuraho. The author expresses her disappointment with the audio-guide for failing to describe a particularly explicit carving, opting instead to focus on the gods and goddesses depicted on either side:

I guess the weight of some words can be too heavy to bear. for a unesco world heritage site. for the government of india. for a man whose wife has to walk three steps behind. actually, even for a school textbook... [sic](Vani 53).

The sexualised language required to describe the erotic carvings proved too sensitive for a conservative bureaucracy. It is important that such an outlet exists for literature that pushes the boundaries of what is marketable, respectable or literary. The depictions of individual sexual subalterns appearing in *Scripts*, their relationships and their lifestyles, are positive, non-stereotypical, and come from *within* the community. The words of the editor of an early collection of lesbian writing in India are applicable to *Scripts*:

We put pen to paper so that one less woman might have to experience the isolation we did. So that the anger and the passion which chokes us might begin to mean something beyond itself, the emotional energy set free from our individual, distinct lives to help other women chart theirs. So that we might make a shared language for the feelings which have been robbed of their name. Claim a public niche beyond the ignorance which has been our licence to live, beyond general tolerance to the acceptance that presupposes understanding (Sukthankar 1999, xvii).

In 2012, Butalia’s press Zubaan published US queer scholar Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*. This explores the idea of masculinity as performed by females, and seeks to understand why societies have paid so little attention to this concept, yet so much to that of male femininity. *Female Masculinity* was originally published in 1998 by Duke University Press. Non-fiction titles purchased from abroad are usually published by Zubaan, and other Indian presses, shortly after their original publication. So what accounts for this long time-lag? Zubaan’s Facebook page announced that they were “thrilled” to be publishing in India “one of the most incisive, radical, and bold gender/queer theorists writing in the world today.” It is possible that after 2009 a greater number of Indian readers would be interested in this title, as discourse on the sexual subaltern circulates amongst wider readerships. Feminist publisher Urvashi Butalia, for instance, has directly linked an increase in sales of queer erotica since 2009 with the reading down of Section 377 in that year (qtd. in D’Costa). Although queer erotica and general issues of sexuality would be targeted at somewhat different (though overlapping) audiences, the reported increase in sales of this particular publishing niche points to a general growth in interest in topics that would have been regarded as taboo earlier. Queer readers and scholars may have always been interested in a title such as Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*, but the topic was previously considered too marginal to be

worthwhile publishing in India. This reinforces the reasons why QueerInk was established: to provide queer-themed books to Indian readers that were otherwise difficult to source from abroad. The reading down of Section 377 has catalysed the breaking of taboos around non-normative sexualities, thus broadening the market potential of books such as Halberstam's in India. Zubaan's publication of *Female Masculinity* suggests that sexual subalternity is now becoming a *feminist* issue, too. With Zubaan's increasing interest in the sexual subaltern, and Yoda Press' long-standing commitment to it, the potential for the greater dissemination of India-focused queer theory and other critiques of heteronormative society is growing.

The December 2013 Supreme Court judgment to uphold Section 377 is obviously very concerning, but considering the recognition that queer movements have gained within "mainstream" India since 2009, perhaps the judgment is not as worrying as has been widely expressed. Post-2009 there has been an increasing willingness on the part of "mainstream" feminists to engage with the sexual subaltern is evident. Queer literatures are expanding, broadening visibility of the sexual subaltern throughout certain sections of Indian society. As Gautam Bhan earlier noted, it is perhaps dangerous to focus solely on the legal aspects of queer lives, as this promotes a narrow face of the movement. In the four and a half years that homosexuality was effectively legal in India, the visibility of the sexual subaltern broadened, and one can hope that despite retrogressive court rulings, it will not shrink again.

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