

Hijras Celebrate New Guru

" Holding their first national convention, over 3000 eunuchs dressed in saris, bangles and bells, converged April 7, 1986 to proclaim their new national guru, 65 year old Bismillah Bi.

They gathered in the central Indian city of Bhopal because it is where their last nationally recognised guru, Nayak Nazeer, died three months ago. Eunuchs told the Associated Press he died from the after-effects of the Union Carbide toxic gas leak that killed more than 2,000 people in 1984.

India is estimated to have between 50,000 and 100,000 eunuchs, who are increasingly becoming organised and demanding equal political rights. Some eunuchs are born without genitals, some are hermaphrodites and many are transvestites and gay men, according to the AP report. Some are men who were kidnapped, castrated and inducted into the cult.

Most are beggars, singers and dancers. No trouble has been reported during the ten-day gathering. Organisers said everyone present is a true eunuch and joined the group voluntarily.

--- from Gay Community News, May 3-10, 1986.



Sexuality, Lesbianism, and South Asian Feminism

This is a slightly revised version of an article that first appeared in COSAW Bulletin Vol. 4(3) 1986.

The term sexuality in the South Asian context appears to carry two related meanings both of which are, to my mind, inadequate. Firstly, it seems to conjure up notions of individual sexual pleasure and desire. As such, attempts to raise the issue for discussion in any feminist forum are immediately met with both

embarrassment (not surprising given our cultural context) and a kind of pious conviction that such 'personal' issues are not the proper province of a mass based feminist movement. Alternately, sexuality is equated with lesbianism with the attendant connotations of 'separatists' and 'anti-male females'. Both senses limit the meaning of sexuality in important and telling ways.

The first individualises and privatizes the term, effectively implying that it escapes political, cultural, social and historical determination. Even the briefest reflection would suggest that such a position is a curious one for feminists to take. For example, the Indian feminist campaign against rape proposed an analysis of the phenomenon that took into account the social, political and cultural forces that shaped women's lives. The nature and experience of rape thus emerged as varying according to one's caste and class position, location in village or city, employment status and so on. If social and political factors intersect in this way to determine rape, how, one might ask, can sexuality be conceived as a personal and autonomous realm?

The second response to sexuality is to equate it with lesbianism. This is perhaps more revealing because it points to the fact that heterosexuality is so normative that it does not need to be named as a sexual practice. Only those who resist this norm are called upon to define their sexuality. It seems to me that in this sense 'sexuality' is analogous to 'gender'. Everybody has both a sexuality and a gender. Yet it is only the marginalised who have produced an explicit and self-conscious discourse on both. Gays and lesbians have insisted on the importance of sexuality and women on that of gender. The equivalence that is presumed between sexuality and lesbianism is also partly a function of a reductive understanding of sexuality as sexual 'preference' or 'choice'. We can see how this notion feeds the first meaning extended to the term as an individual's private matter.

If sexuality is neither individual, nor private, nor simply a code word for lesbianism, what is it and how should it be approached? It seems to me that one might begin by applying some of the fundamental principles of historical materialism broadly conceived. If we did this, we would have to conclude that sexuality is a historically specific set of social practices, one of which - heterosexuality - is considered normal, while its alternatives - lesbianism, homosexuality, bisexuality - are regarded as abnormal. As the norm, heterosexuality distances itself from other sexual practices, registering these as deviant and institutionalising its own normative status.

The principle of heterosexuality is enshrined in everything from our customs and mores, to our legal system: what constitutes a 'family', who counts as a 'spouse', the celebratory status of heterosexual marriage. The legal system not only embodies class ideology and the ideology of male supremacy, but also that of heterosexuality. Thus two women who are committed to each other cannot purchase medical insurance 'as a couple' or receive tax compensation as 'married persons'. Worse, two adult women who may have lived together for years cannot have the assurance that hospitals will treat them as each others 'next of kin'. In the USA there have been many instances when a patient's lover has been debarred from having any contact with her because she is 'only a friend' or 'merely a roommate'. In such instances, parents are given primary rights over the patient. In other words, in the absence of a husband women are regarded as being the responsibility of their parents. Any other relationship is disregarded as illegitimate.

On a more day to day basis, many South Asian women who may be lesbians are compelled to submit to heterosexual marriage. A few who cannot face the (cont'd.)

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