

EDITORIAL

Editorial

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I

Three thematic groups were formed at the initiative of the Centre for Health Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences with 'Sexuality in India' being one of them. This group aimed to bring together recent research on various aspects of sexuality, promote primary research in relatively ignored areas, and thus, contribute to the attempts to define the scope and strategies of sexuality research in the future. I take this opportunity to thank all the working group members from TISS and the two external advisors (Dr. M. C. Watsa and Dr. Ravi Verma) for their contribution to the various activities of the working group.

Two special issues of *The Indian Journal of Social Work* (IJSW) bring together research on sexuality, most of which were presented at a National Workshop in December 2000 and were subsequently revised. This volume, the first among the two, includes seven papers presented at the Workshop and one paper that illustrates the linkages between research and action and addresses the construction of masculinity among young men, an aspect that was not represented at the Workshop. Reviews of two recent books on sexuality, included in this issue, are expected to provide an update on the status of sexuality research.

II

A decade ago, the IJSW brought out a special issue on 'Sexual Behaviour and AIDS in India' (Volume 55, Issue 4, October 1994) that carried a set of articles presented at a workshop held at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. This workshop, more or less, coincided with the beginning of sexuality research in India in the context of AIDS. During the last decade, sexuality research in India has grown in volume

and in many directions. The impetus for this growth has come mainly from two sources: feminist, gender-based research; and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The first *source* had a concern to understand and deal with violence against women. Recognising the general neglect of women's reproductive health, both by the family and the state, sexuality was viewed as a key arena of violence and neglect. The other source was the growing concern with the spread of HIV infection, predominantly through the sexual mode of transmission, leading to a fear of an epidemic. The above sources were instrumental in guiding the research themes, methodology of research, and the overall theoretical orientation of sexuality research in India.

It is necessary to acknowledge the existence of a third stream of sexuality research, emerging from the disciplinary concerns of sociology and anthropology. These research do not direct themselves at problem-solving and are located primarily at university departments; the first two strands are more 'applied research' in nature. Population studies-related sexuality research has been another characteristic of sexuality research in India since the 1990s. The shift from family planning to maternal and child health and subsequently to reproductive and child health has also coincided with the beginning of sexuality research in the context of HIV/AIDS. The consensus arrived at the International Conference of Population and Development has, over the years, resulted in sexuality, sexual health and reproductive health becoming priority areas in population research in India.

The different philosophies and purpose of research led to a situation where the strands of sexuality research (specifically academic and non-academic) have largely remained aloof to each other. Recent social science research on sexuality, ignoring contemporary changes and by neglecting empirical research, has not been very useful to the health researchers in conceptualising sexuality as being shaped by the social structures, institutions and their ideologies. Health research, on the other hand, in its enthusiasm to bring about societal changes (or sexual behavioural changes) continues to undermine the significance of structures and ideologies.

While the term 'sex' refers both to an act and to a category of person, to a practice and to a gender (Weeks, 1986:13), the concept of sexuality is almost all encompassing. It includes sexual identities; sexual norms; sexual acts, practices and experiences, feelings, desires and fantasies; sexual awareness and sexual knowledge: all these within hetero, homo and other forms of sexual relations. Because sexuality is socially

constructed and is structurally ingrained into every social institution, social norms, values and social interactions, it becomes a means through which power operates in society. The difficulty in researching sexuality is enhanced by the fact that the social constructions and subjective experiences vary with age, social class, community and gender (Vance, 1984). In countries like ours, religion has an overarching influence on these constructions and experiences. It is precisely due to these features that sexuality becomes a powerful conceptual tool, as argued by many, to explore power and gender relations in a society (for example, Dixon-Muller, 1993; Holland, Ramazonoglu, Sharpe and Thomson, 1992). Much of sexuality research in India, although not conceptualised thus, is dealing directly or indirectly with the exercise of power—some at the structural level and many at the operational level. Yet, there also exists a large volume of *work that ignores* the significance of social power and reduces sexuality to individual acts and dispositions determined by the biology of body.

It is mainly through women-centred research that an understanding of the gendered nature of sexuality and its varied constructions and formations have emerged in India. For example, research on the structural arrangements that control female sexuality through confinement and seclusion (Dube, 1988; Ganesh, 1989); marriage practices (Uberoi, 1993), including practices of child marriages; restrictions on widows; and the role of sexual ideology in subordinating female sexuality have been highlighted by some of the studies (Gandhi and Shah, 1992). More recently, studies on violence towards women have pointed out that sexuality is an important issue in producing as well as resisting male violence. The pervasiveness of male violence in varying forms and degrees targeting female sexuality, the changing forms of patriarchy both in the public as well as private domains, the changing construction of femininity and masculinity in the context of globalisation, and the role played by the media are themes that need to be researched.

Yet, it is the threat of an HIV epidemic that emerged during the late 1980s, that has provided the context for the growth of empirical research on sexuality. The effort to control the spread of HIV was initially dominated by an epidemiological approach, which focused on the identification of groups of potential victims or carriers, the so-called 'pool of infection' or 'conduit of infection'. Subsequent research revealed the transmission of the virus through heterosexual routes in many countries, including India. This blurred the boundaries

of the 'pools of infection' and showed the entire population to be at risk.

The articles in this and the forthcoming volume reflect all these approaches to sexuality and as well as a variety of concerns and methodological approaches to the study of sexuality.

III

The first four articles in this volume attempt to conceptualise sexuality by exploring the array of meanings attributed to the term 'sex'. These papers are distinct from each other in terms of their concerns as well as their methods used for this exploration.

Ganesh's enquiry is based on her experiences in conducting sexuality research and running intervention programmes among young people in Delhi. The stalling point for understanding and discussing sexuality, according to her, is by interrogating oneself — what we know and what we do not know. Such interrogations then lead to the expansion of knowledge through research and this research culminates in a more general understanding of sexuality as it is lived out in people's lives. Ganesh draws special attention to the importance of taking sexuality research beyond the counting exercise of with who, how many times, when, where, and so on. There is now a vast amount of such data; yet we know very little about what meanings people attribute to their acts and to their contexts and to the consequences of their actions.

It is this acute sense to reach out, that determines the methods of research. Ganesh underlines the need to bond with the group that they work with, and advocates self-disclosure as a means of enquiry and the need for the researcher to be a counsellor. She addresses the ethical dilemma of an activist researcher who may be required to switch the roles of a researcher and an activist. The importance given to self-disclosure and counselling are anathema to academic researchers, but these are issues that action research has thrown up time and again. They have emerged from working with people, often in need and distress. How does one deal with these issues in action research? Can ethical and moral codes be strictly prescribed and adhered to as a matter of administrative procedure such as getting a consent form signed by the respondent? Shouldn't they be an inseparable part, a guiding principle that underlies the overall approach to research and action? By teasing them out and enlisting them, are we not assuming that all research and action can be made ethically and morally right by

adhering to a set of 'codes'? Moral and ethical concerns need to be integral to the conceptualisation of the research itself.

The paper by Murthy and Vasana explores young men's ideas of what constitute 'sex'; the meanings attached to the term; and the acts and practices associated with it. Since sexuality is a fluid concept and it varies across social groups, they are specifically interested in seeing if there are differences between young men from urban and peri-urban areas and mapping these differences. The paper is based on data gathered from two locations (Bangalore, in Karnataka; and Nagar in Maharashtra). Apart from identifying similarities and dissimilarities between the two groups of young men, as other studies have shown, their data once again reiterate that some of the core elements in the construction of masculinity include a concern with 'body building' and semen preservation, sexual initiation through commercial sex, and relying on pornographic and erotic materials for sexual information. Another feature that was common to the two groups, perhaps a more recent trend, is the nature of premarital sexual relationships between boys and girls and the differential perceptions of the partners. Boys show preference for short-term liaisons with girls without 'emotional involvement' and certainly without a commitment towards marriage. This is a radical departure from the traditional notions of 'romance' as well as from what is portrayed through popular films. Can such a move towards an 'anti-hero' be analysed in terms of young people's attempts to embrace modernity with its underlying emphasis on consumption and a preoccupation with self-fulfilment of desires and pleasures? The data presented also challenges the tendency to stereotype urban youth as opposed to others as having liberal sexual views. The peri-urban men were found to be more 'liberal' in their views with regard to premarital sex and multi-partner sexual relationships. The view that urban youth, in general, have a liberal attitude to premarital sex is a stereotype based on what is observed among some youth in public places; a large proportion of urban youth continue to negotiate sexuality within traditional norms while experimenting with opportunities offered by modernity in urban spaces.

Mahadevan, Siva Raju, Jayasree and Sandhya Rani attempt to describe a conceptual model to study the 'determinants of sexuality' by defining a set of dependent and independent variables. The dependent variable, 'sexual behaviour', is further categorised in the context of marital status such as premarital, marital and extramarital sexual behaviour. Sexual restraint and abnormal sex are also viewed as

dependent variables in studying sexuality. There are several sets and sub-sets of independent variables that influence each of the above categories of sexual behaviour. Though this article acknowledges the broader meaning of the term sexuality, it largely ignores the current debates on sexuality and confines itself to the determinants of sexual behaviour. A conceptual model is presented that guides the discussion in the article. This can be used to examine the effect of individual and set(s) of factors on sexual behaviour and also on the implications of such behaviour. The article also illustrates the practice of narrowing down 'sexuality' to 'sexual behaviour', even when the larger meaning of sexuality and the variety of contextual factors that shape sexuality are recognised. Thus, the article throws important questions like: What should be (or should there be) an operational definition of sexuality in sexuality research and what should determine the nature of such definitions? What should determine the methodology in sexuality research? Are there a set of 'appropriate' methods in sexuality research?

In the subsequent article on 'Womanhood and Spirituality', Nayar widens the scope of sexuality as concept in the sense that the article views expressions of spirituality as a part of sexuality. The author utilises narrations from mythology, to some extent history, and the modern feminist discourses to analyse the different forms of spirituality and its relation to culture. One focus is on the changes that have occurred in expressions of sexuality over time. Placed primarily in the Indian context, the article also tries to trace the travel of individual women through the path of spirituality in a lifespan perspective. It shows, through an analysis of information from various sources, that spirituality has different meanings, to people from varying contexts; such meanings may range from possession to transcendence. The article concludes with an acknowledgement of spirituality among men, and notes that the paths, expressions and attributes to spirituality are differentiated by gender. One major implication for sexuality research that this article raises (though not explicitly stated) is how the concept, construction and differentiations in spirituality can be addressed in (mainstream) sexuality research?

IV

Many a times, the sole focus or one of the major areas of investigation in sexuality research is the pattern of sexual behaviour. Sexual behaviour studies in India are pretty large in number. This number has

increased in recent years predominantly in the milieu of augmented trepidations about HIV/AIDS and other reproductive health issues. Such investigations may be categorised based on the geographical area covered, the sample size, the nature of the studied groups, the issues included in the research, and the methodology adopted. In addition, it is noteworthy that in a number of instances, the major concern of the studies on sexual behaviour is not sexual behaviour itself; rather the implications and consequences and ways to intervene to alleviate certain preventable aspects are the main aspects of the investigation. Not that sexual behaviour studies should not focus on other issues; but it is to be kept in mind that the actual focus of the research would determine how sexuality is visualised and how sexual behaviour is assumed to be related to sexual outcomes and also how in depth the behaviours are deliberated.

In terms of geographical coverage, sexual behaviour studies may cover rural areas, urban areas, metropolitan areas, a few villages, one or more states, an entire nation, or nations. The size of the sample may also range widely: the size may be small as in some cases of qualitative studies or may be a few hundreds as in small-scale studies. In a few instances, the sample covered is quite large allowing considerable extent of generalisations. Studies may also focus on males, females, both sexes, the general population, or specific groups like adolescents and youth, students, non-students, female and male sex workers, truck drivers, drug users, or other groups like the disabled or those with HIV/AIDS. The methodology used may be quantitative, qualitative, or a combination of both. Not only do studies diverge in terms of the methodological approaches, but they also differ considerably in rigour.

It is also worthwhile to examine how the term 'sexuality' is conceptualised in the studies on sexual behaviour. There are studies on sexuality that seek also (along with other objectives) to conceptualise sexuality using theoretical discussions and empirical observations from the study settings. On the other hand, there are other studies where sexual behaviour is given only a peripheral analysis and the major focus lies in the implications and consequences of behavioural patterns. Yet another group is the knowledge, attitude and practice studies of sexual behaviour. Since there can be a variety of reasons and concerns in studying sexual behaviour (including those mentioned above), the aspects covered in such studies vary widely and would depend on the understanding of the concept of sexuality, the group(s) studied, and the concerns of the researcher, especially in terms of implications. Some recent comprehensive reviews of

sexual behaviour studies reveal that although these studies provide general information on different aspects, there are serious methodological limitations and call for rigorous studies of communities and of various age groups in different parts of the country (Chandiramani, Kapadia, Khanna and Misra, 2002; Jeebhoy 1996; Khanna, Gurbaxani and Sengupta, 2002). The three articles (articles 5 to 7) based on sexual behaviour studies, included in this volume, also share some of the characteristics mentioned above.

The article by Somayajulu studies sexual behaviour with a prime focus on the implications of sexual behaviour patterns for HIV/AIDS. The article, thus, analyses the sexual behaviour of males from different age groups in the state of Andhra Pradesh. It uses qualitative research methods like focus group discussions and in depth interviews to explore the sexual behaviour pattern of male students in the state and men involved in fishing activity in both rural and urban areas. Using structured interview schedules, the study also collected data on sexual behaviour from adult males aged 18 years and above. A total of 10 focus group discussions were carried out and a sample of 2300 adult males were covered. The study found that awareness about condoms was higher among students as compared to both fishermen and other adult males. Among both students and fishermen, sex with girlfriends and sex workers was common, with the fishermen having a higher extent of sexual involvement with sex workers. Lack of knowledge and lack of sexual satisfaction were reported by fishermen as reasons for not using condoms. Condom usage was less among students primarily because they believed that it was not relevant as many of them had sex with the same partner. Male having sex with male is high among students, particularly among those staying in hostels. The survey among adult males showed that the extent of premarital and extramarital sex was higher among rural males. Awareness about AIDS was low in rural areas as compared to urban areas. The article reiterates the need to sensitise these groups about the HIV/AIDS risk they carry in the context of high risk sexual behaviour — with multiple partners, including commercial sex workers (CSWs). Except for the finding of higher premarital and extramarital sex in rural areas, the other results have been observed in studies conducted elsewhere. The lower level of condom use in the situation of higher degree of sexual behaviour surely calls for urgent interventions.

Despite the fact that young people are recognised as a high risk group, there are only few studies directed at some of the specific

groups within this category, adolescent sex workers (ASWs) being one of them. The next article, by Krishnakumari, focuses on the sexual behaviour of ASWs in the state of Kerala, a demographically and socially advanced state. Using observation, focus group discussion, key informant interviews and informal discussions, the study identified 825 adolescents in the age group 14-18 years who were involved in the sex trade in three major cities of the state. Out of them 300 were selected for studying sexual behaviour pattern and the reasons leading to an early introduction to sexual life among them. As one would expect, these adolescents come from lower socioeconomic status — 55 per cent of them live in streets. Familial factors, economic instability, early marriage and individual-level factors were largely responsible for the children to get initiated into an early sex life and into sex trade. Age at the first sexual encounter was low and the ASWs are engaged in high risk behaviour to a great extent. A combination of economic need, demands of clients and a feeling of being an outcaste compel them to continue in the trade. Lack of knowledge about STD and AIDS and a further lower level of condom use characterise the ASWs. Reproductive morbidity is very high among them; frequent engagement in high risk behaviour and low level of knowledge puts them in a very difficult situation. The findings of this study obviously requires urgent attention both in order to reduce the number of children engaging in sex trade and to improve the situation of those who are currently engaged in sex trade

While the article by Somayajulu focused on students, fishermen and other adults in selected areas of Andhra Pradesh, the article by Jayasree and Parvathy examines sexual behaviour and reproductive health risk among CSWs in Tirupati, the biggest pilgrim centre in Andhra Pradesh, and perhaps in India. With the help of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working with the CSWs in the area, 200 sex workers were selected for the study. Focus group discussions were utilised to prepare a structured interview schedule. The findings showed poverty and related economic burden along with marital dissolutions as the major reasons for selecting this profession. Lack of education and skills, exploitation by brokers and the police and the continuing economic necessities characterise their life. The study also found a very high extent of STD prevalence and a largely high level of awareness about STD and AIDS. The article highlights the need to safeguard their rights through networking and intervention programmes. Use of condoms was relatively high due to the NGO intervention. At the same time the prevalence of STDs and

other reproductive health problems are also very high. In this situation, the article calls for innovative information, education and communication strategies to reduce the incidence of reproductive health problems among the CSWs.

V

The last article in this issue underlines the need to translate research into action. This article, by Verma, Mahendra, Pulerwitz, Barker, Van Dam and Flessenkaemper, addresses this issue by focusing on a relatively little explored area by sexuality research in India: masculinity and gender norms. The absence of scientific information on the construction of gender identity and its influence on perceptions and attitudes are highlighted here. This operations research was carried out in three slums of Mumbai, in three stages — formative research, pilot intervention, and evaluation. This article presents findings from the first two stages. The formative research phase used qualitative methods to explore the construction of masculinity with an aim to identify possible strategies to influence masculinity and gender norms. The second phase implemented a set of intervention activities developed by the participants in the first phase. The objective of the intervention was to deconstruct certain prevailing constructs of masculinity and to promote equitable gender attitudes and behaviour. The experiences during this phase showed that through the process of owning, sharing and relationship building, it is possible to modify the construction of sexuality of young men thus helping to inculcate more gender equitable attitudes.

The eight papers in the forthcoming volume would focus on mainly two aspects: the perceptions, attitudes and behaviour related to reproductive and sexual health and their implications, and certain emerging trends and issues in sexuality research in India.

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Guest Editor

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