

Some Thoughts on *Because I Have a Voice*

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I would like to begin by thanking Arvind Narrain and Vinay Chandran for inviting me to share my response to the anthology. I thank the editors and each and every contributor to the anthology for their creative work.

In reading the anthology I found myself swinging between gratitude for the beauty and courage of the lives and political journeys it chronicled, and sorrow at the needless suffering imposed upon so many, by a suffocating ideology that insists that there are only two genders and prescribes as legitimate for each a stultifyingly narrow range of sexual behaviour.

It is heart rending and soul destroying to have to argue for the reality and legitimacy of diversity in gender and sexuality. To have to argue for something that one is, to have to insist that one exists and moreover has the right to exist is an absurdity and a scandal. However, that is the task to which we who are challenging hetero-patriarchy are compelled to apply ourselves. It is, of course, a task which has much in common with challenging exclusions on other grounds such as caste, class and race. When one sees the hatred of diversity encoded in all these exclusionary ideologies, and contrasts it with the rich density and variety of existing social forms and life practices, one begins to understand why there is so much violence. Anything that so consistently and vehemently flies in the face of social evidence to the contrary requires such a repressive as well as

disciplinary regime. Ergo, in the case of sexual diversity, the violence of state, family, medical institutions on the one hand and the self-doubt, confusion and self-policing by individuals and groups on the other. This dynamic is all too well illustrated by the pieces in the anthology.

There is much that can be said by way of a response to *Because I Have a Voice*, but I will restrict my remarks today to one issue alone. I would like to ask whether queer theory serves us well in setting out to theorize the diversity of sexual and gender practices and identities in India. For me this question is located within the broader epistemological and theoretical challenges faced by any theorist of social life. Let me begin to indicate these challenges by means of the following propositions which summarize my starting premises.

* We live in infinity but social theory is for the most part written as though the world were a finite object that can, and must, be convincingly if not exhaustively described.

*We have at our disposal language which by its nature constrains our imagination even as it unleashes it.

*We are situated beings. The stories we tell locate us.

*How then do we embrace specificity while claiming neither too much nor too little about the worlds we conjure with our words?

One reason why queer theory has been able to emerge so rapidly is because it has been able to build on twenty years of feminist work on two key concepts that it shares with feminism, namely, gender and sexuality. Queer theory has been able to take forward extant analysis of gender and sexuality as conceptual categories and in the process it has complicated and opened up these terms to further reflection. Queer theory has also, of course, introduced its

own conceptual tools, such as the notion of performativity. The relationship between feminist and queer movements is evident at many levels. Queer theorists are also feminists and vice versa and this intersection is illustrated in this anthology also.

But what is interesting about queer theory is that it has manifested a tendency to absorb earlier movements into itself-implicitly if not explicitly. While this is far more true of the US and the UK, its echoes may be traced in the argument here that queer theory and politics can be an open and flexible space in which we can all, as it were, discover ourselves as queer since each of us is, in some sense, challenging normativities of various kinds be they caste, class, gender, sexuality, race, nation etc. (This point is made most explicitly by Nivedita Menon in the anthology, although others also imply this as the potential of queer politics.) Thus, unlike Marxism or feminism which proliferated a series of hyphenated theoretical or political affiliations - Marxist feminism, lesbian feminism, liberal feminism, we do not hear of queer Marxism or queer feminism (Only one contributor Sheba Tejani describes herself as a queer feminist, arguably an empirical not theoretical naming). Herein lies a mystery. I would suggest that the very inclusive gestures of queer theory bear investigation. Put another way the absence of such hyphenations invite our attention.

Now let me clarify that I am not suggesting that there is something sinister in this stated intent to be inclusive, although depending on the national context there may indeed be cause for wariness. (For example, queer theory in the US and UK reinvigorated the subjective sense of empowerment of many white social theorists who had felt that their *locus standi* as radical socio-political subjects had been fatally undermined by the trenchant critique of the racism and/or whiteness of their work in feminist and other contexts. But that's another story.)

My interest in raising the question here is rather that of the historian or sociologist of knowledge. From this perspective, a series of questions come to the fore. In what contexts do concepts arise? What are the social, cultural, political, economic and existential conditions for their emergence? How does a particular, new concept relate to pre-existing ones? Does it radically break from them? Does it refine them? Does it extend their application? Is the concept transformed in the process? If so, how? We need to ask these questions so that we are well placed to evaluate the significance of our contribution as also its relevance. Attending to history does not merely save us from repeating past errors. It also throws useful light on the specificity of our present moment.

If queer theory and politics are not to become merely a generational intervention (queer movement is to the late 1990's and 2000's what feminism was to the late 1970's and 1980's) or simply one more item in a laundry list of developments- peasant movements, labour movements, civil liberties, queer movements, then such analysis of its tools needs to be undertaken. The richness of the histories of these movements compels us to seek languages that can illuminate their complexity. And as cultural theorists we are also called upon to analyze the articulation or non-articulation of these movements with one another and with various aspects of the prevailing social order.

Let me repeat the foundational premises noted above.

*We live in infinity although social theory is for the most part written as though the world were a finite object that can, and must be, convincingly if not exhaustively described.

*We have at our disposal language which by its nature constrains our imagination even as it unleashes it.

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Where we start shapes how we conceive and imagine our projects. I offer this one example from the introduction by way of illustration. The introduction is framed around the notion of 'queer politics.' This immediately situates the material, the matter at hand, within the history of liberal modernity and the social movements that have characterized it. Part way through the introduction, by way of cataloguing the "diverse practices that come under the political project 'queer'" the editors note what they describe as "traditional identities that are based on practices of gender and sexual non-conformity." The examples cited here are jogtas and jogappas in North Karnataka and Maharashtra and the shivshaktis and ganacharis in South India. Now, this statement "traditional identities that are based on practices of gender and sexual non-conformity." has the potential, as it were, to unravel the entire theoretical rug.

Let us spend a few moments thinking through these words.

"Traditional" suggests that the lived identities were not the result of the freedoms modernity sanctions or the practices it proscribes as it constitutes itself. Rather it implies the opposite: that these practices predated modernity or at the very least were not directly a consequence of it. They could even have emerged during the modern period but may have had little or no causal relationship to modernity as a project. Our theory must reflect this reality. As long as it draws on a framework for understanding sexuality in India that is closely tied to certain histories of sex and gender in the West, we will find that our theory sits uneasily on top of the data rather than helping us to make sense of it. And much of the data - the lives lived, dreams spoken and unspoken, modes of self-naming, forms

of community developed, the nature of tolerance or intolerance etc., will constantly spill out of the frame and threaten to dissolve it. Many of the contributors are well aware of this: apart from the editors, we may note Akshay Khanna, Alok Gupta, Chayanika Shah, Maya Sharma, Deepa V. N. Still, the notion of queer politics continues to inform the introduction although elsewhere it rarely appears or when it does seems to be more of a place marker- as a kind of short-hand for the diversity of communities and self-namings that are evident today.

Let us now turn from the word traditional to the next word namely “identities.” “Identities” is a word that has come to assume a limited, mostly individualist sense (even collectivities are generally assumed to be collections of individuals each with their own rights and duties). When conjugated with traditional however, the term identity immediately points to something broader, something irreducibly social and cultural, something with a *history*. “Traditional identities” thus evokes not just a present but also a past. This would have implications for the languages we use to describe the lives of these practitioners of “gender and sexual non-conformity.” A narrative articulated around emergence, defiance, assertion, insistence all themes woven through the introduction would then perhaps have to be localized not generalized. For while this mode of telling the story may well be appropriate to the experience of specific class fractions and segments of society, it may obscure the histories of yet others, perhaps many others. If our intent is to cultivate an open space, then we must tell the story of sexual and gender diversity in a way that does not, as it were, unconsciously generalize or globalize one particular ‘local.’

Now we come to the phrase “practices of gender and sexual non-conformity.” This is a very interesting set of words. In describing gender and

sexuality as a set of practices, we are instantly freed from the air extinguishing notion of either as somehow 'natural.' Likewise, the term non-conformity is a social description. But, and here's the question: can we describe gender and sexual practices without recourse to language that re-centers that which is considered the normative content of both. If gender and sexuality are social, and if we accept a la Foucault that the normativeness of heterosexuality depends on the creation of Otherness or outlaw sexualities, then does it not follow that the very idea of non-conformist is itself misleading, is itself a distraction?

The whole numbers game of 10% of the world is queer etc. is beside the point. Philosophically, the normative requires the non-normative to define itself, not vice versa. Given this what we might wish to strive for is a discourse that resists the social imposition of marginality by refusing its terms. I am sure that I do not need to elaborate the psychological and existential advantages of refusing self-marginalization. So how might one rewrite this phrase to avoid that problem? Well, one possibility is to rewrite 'traditional identities that are based on practices of gender and sexual non-conformity,' as 'traditional identities based on fluid practices of gender and sexuality that challenge the rigidities of hetero-normativity.' And then one can go on to elaborate the isness of those practices—their specificity, poetics, their social organization, the kind of social challenges they represent and encounter, the histories out of which these practices have emerged etc. etc.

It is important to emphasize that my purpose in pointing to such problems is not, as it were, to wag a critical index finger at the editors or contributors. As noted at the outset, these are problems inevitably faced by anyone undertaking any form of social description. We are, all of us, faced with the exceedingly difficult issue of being as scrupulous as we can about the specificity of what we

are seeking to describe. We are all, each of us, confronted with the question of how not to claim too much or too little for what we are saying.

It seems to me that we are at a critical juncture in the study of gender and sexuality in India. We need to see both as fluid and on a continuum. This would require both the women's movement **and** the gay movement to accept that gender is not binary. Indeed there is a range of ways in which individuals live out gender regardless of the bodies into which they are born and the gender and sexual destinies charted out for those bodies by dominant society. This is not a call for revolution. It is simply an acknowledgment of what already exists. The need for such acknowledgement is urgent. For in its absence we cannot be sure if a biological man who loves other men and seeks to live gender in a way currently deemed feminine would opt to be part of the hijra community or whether he/she would live out his/her desires in some other way. If such acceptance of gender fluidity were to be had many lesbian women who contemplate gender reassignment surgery may set aside this option since there would no longer be a cognitive dissonance experienced between being female and loving women. (This point is made by several contributors, including Chayanika Shah, Bina Fernandez and Gomathy N. B.) If the gay men's movement really took gender critique on board it would dismantle the hierarchy of masculinities currently in place. Likewise, if we accept that sexuality is fluid and on a continuum, then we can accept that one's sexual practices may change and that relationship between sexual practice and sexual identity may be complex.

We need to open up the terms of reference by means of which we are to understand the social relations of gender and sexuality in India. And we need to do this because reality demands it. The extraordinarily creative ways in which people across class, caste and community are making sense of gender and

sexual longings deserves to be honoured. Otherwise we constrain the possibilities of describing gender and sexuality as they are actually being lived. As well, we limit our capacity to imagine a world in which both may be seen as the sites of creative experimentation.