

Voice for an Identity: Globalization and Gay Community

- Sunita Agarwal

Abstract: The paper proposes to examine the research work of the writer, Parmesh Shahani, entitled "Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (be) longing in Contemporary India". Being a gay himself, the writer voices and represents the cause of Bombay gay community, placing and positioning the politics of gay identity in a broader socio-historical context of globalization, internet technologies, and the media industry. Against social institution and statutory norms, the community struggles to establish their position above gender and sexuality, destabilizing the fixity and categorization of identity. Section 377 of the Indian Penal code, commonly known as 'Anti Sodomy law' which criminalized homosexuality in India was repealed by High court in July 2009 on the plea of human rights. Nevertheless, religion and religious scripture still do not approve such practices and declare them as taboo. The paper, based on this framework and background, will interrogate (1) the intervention of mass media, internet and globalization in changed/unchanged perspective (2) location of gender and identity of this queer community.

Keywords: gender, gay community, globalization, gaze, internet technologies, mass-media.

Globalization has greatly impacted communication, community, culture and civilization. The borderless and boundary less world can be contacted and connected at the tip of the finger. This accessibility of 24/7, be it communication or commutation has helped in strengthening collaboration and relationships on the one hand, on the other the viability of criticism and contamination. The much hyped news by mass media channels, spread at lightening speed, contribute in the formation and transformation of public opinion. Even firmly rooted taboos and traditions are passing through a period of transition and; attitudes and perspectives alter though the change might be slow sometimes. Western constructions of gay culture are now circulating widely beyond the boundaries of western nations due to influences as diverse as Internet communication, global dissemination of entertainment and other media, increased travel and tourism, migration, displacement, and transnational citizenship. Internet through its social networking sites has provided them space for the realization of their sexuality and 'locus for expressive' and 'emotionally reciprocal' behaviour. These online groups function as 'third space' for its members, a place other than home and work. Intervention of international mass media on such issues lend them visibility to all across the world and the support, financial as well as at the group level, encourage them to struggle for their rights and identity. The exposure to gay culture through various international TV channels and

NET, have boosted the confidence level to demand for equal treatment at work place and society. The present paper proposes to examine the research work and the memoir of the writer, Parmesh Shahani, entitled "Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (be) longing in Contemporary India". Being a gay himself, the writer voices and represents the cause of Bombay gay community, placing and positioning the politics of gay identity in a broader socio-historical context of globalization, internet technologies, and the media industry. Against social institution and statutory norms, the community struggles to establish its position above gender and sexuality, destabilizing the fixity and categorization of identity. The familiar logic that homosexuality corrupts 'authentic' Indian culture and the influence of the decadent West is ironic, given the fact that section 377 of the Indian penal code is a remnant of British colonial legacy. Under the International pressures of UNO, India has decriminalized homosexuality Section 377 of the Indian Penal code, commonly known as 'Anti Sodomy law' in July 2009 on the plea of human rights. An epistemic shift in public perception can be visualized after the repealing of section 377, Nevertheless, religion and religious scripture still do not approve such practices and declare them as taboo so it is sans the societal and cultural approval. This queer community interrogates at the constructed nature of essential Indian ness, and the ideology of compulsory hetero-sexuality through which such essentialist understanding of national identity was constructed. These sexual minorities have voiced their resistance against such discriminatory social, religious and cultural practices which had stigmatized them and treat them as outcast. The paper, based on this framework and background, will interrogate (1) location of gender and identity of this queer community in India and the West. (2) The intervention of mass media, internet and globalization in changed/unchanged perspective

Our culture tends to define sexuality in two ways: biologically, which is determined and programmed by hormones as such human beings have no control over it, and in terms of moral and ethical choices which are determined by social and cultural norms, hence controlled culturally, politically, and socially. Society structures itself on hegemonic binaries, where one binary wields power over other. These binaries are often destabilized through resistance against their power politicking. The universal non normative sexuality deviate the ethical and moral values and said to be against cultural norms. The ideas about gender and sex being innate and essential were critiqued and open to reformulation. These minor sexual communities affiliate to ancient culture and civilization to validate their claims for equal rights. From ancient Indian culture they cite many examples which prove that these minority sexual groups were not discriminated but they earned the same respect and position in the society. Their marginal status is only a politics of modern society. Throughout Hindu and Vedic texts there are many descriptions of saints, demigods, and even the Supreme Lord transcending gender norms and manifesting multiple combinations of sex and gender. Transsexuals are also venerated e.g. Lord Vishnu as 'Mohini' and Lord Shiva as 'Ardhanarishwara' (which means half woman). The Swiss

doctor Karoly Maria Benkert in 1869 and Richard Von Krafft Ebing in his book *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886, 1892) were the first to define these two distinct desires as 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality' for the first time. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs writing in 1860s and 1870s also defended homosexuality calling it as 'man-manly' love as natural (and not deviant as by done earlier) and said their constituted a 'third sex' 'not fully men or women'. For women womanly sexual desire he posited the possibility of the term "fourth sex". In Indian religion also, we have a third sex or neuter. Queer theorists interrogate and destabilize the normative heterosexuality as historical and cultural construct. They deconstructs the prerogative binary of normative heterosexuality by positioning itself as a 'performative' against 'a social construct' which reinforces the man woman relationship as the basis of the family. According to Judith Butler the concept of "performativity" describes the culturally-scripted character of identity, which is generated by power through repeated citations of norms and their transgression. In *Queer Theory*, Jageos notes that "queer theory locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. They emphasized that there is an unstable relationship between sex, gender and desire". Jeffrey Weeks adopts the same stance when he says "what we define as 'sexuality' is a historical construction and draws attention on those practices which destabilizes and denaturalizes what Butter has called the 'heterosexual matrix'. Homosexuality has been referred as an inversion of heterosexuality, which subverts the traditional genders binaries of masculine and feminine.

In *Capitalism and Gay Identity* (1983), John D'Emilies traces the shift in the objective of procreation: the basis of heterosexuality. He says that family was no longer governed by the 'imperative' to procreate and produce additional workers to sustain its workers. Instead sexuality became separated from procreation and come to be a way of expressing intimacy and experiencing pleasure. This allowed 'some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex". (8) In capitalism, where consumption means to satisfy desire, similarly individual pursued and satisfied their sexual desire outside the social gaze and social surveillance of community. These changes in economical, political and social ideology paved the way for 'alternative sexualities' and hence the development of homosexual communities. Another argument that advocates of queer and homosexuality provides is that body itself is discursively constructed; that anatomical sex, in fact configured in language by medical and psychological discourse. The cultural matters denoting masculinity and femininity are arbitrary and subject to change. Drag Butler says, plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed (Gender 37) she further says that "we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex

and gender, gender and performance” (Gender 137). Masculinity and femininity are thus performances. Denaturalizing gender, Butler says, Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts in their highly rigid regulatory from that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being (Gender 190) Classical theories of psychological development hypothesize the origins of adult sexual orientation in childhood experiences. However recent research argues that psychological and interpersonal events throughout the life explain several sexual orientations.

Parmesh Shahani's book *Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (be) longing in Contemporary India* is a research work and a memoir; it critically examines the imagination and reconfiguration of Indian gayness in the light of its emergent cultural, media and political alliances. Expounding on Anna Appadurai's theory of ruptures in global and cultural processes and disjuncture in different scapes, which contest and sometimes subverts the imagined world of official mind and Kim Christian Scroder's notion of 'triangulation', 'where different bearings give the correct position of an object' he approaches the concept of gayness in India. By using multi-sited ethnography, he examines and utilizes all the different manifestation of Gay Bombay, such as the website, the newsgroup message posting and the physical events in Bombay city. He also bases his research activities on archival media research, close studies of gay themed films and books, memoir writings, and in-depth interviews. Through these interviews and interactions with gay and straight men about their personal encounters and experiences while negotiating with their sexual identity, he maps out the notion and locatedness of gayness in Bombay's cultural geography. These narratives infused with subjectivity of the author provide historiography and sociology of gay culture in India. He also offers suggestions in the form of 'modus vivendi' for future of this community from his research and observations.

Here, in this case, writing is a means of assertion for one's rights. Personal becomes political. Addressing the various issues and problems related to the origins and factors leading to homosexuality, the identity problems, the psychological problems in coming to terms with their sexuality, their health hazards, the conflict between recognition and rejection by the family members as well as society at large, by sharing his own experiences as well as interviewing around fifty members of “Gay Bombay” which is an on line gay group the writer relates all these issues to Indian social, political, cultural and religious background. By contextualizing and then comparing the problems of western countries on this issue, Parmesh Shahni succeeds in bringing out the cultural and religious differences of countries. The western countries where homosexuality is already legalized have more liberal attitude towards the homosexuals. In India, the contestations on such issues have become polarized along the lines of traditionalist modernist conflicts. There the gays have come out of closet life and in some of the countries the marriage between same sexes is also legalized. In India, silence on such issues is generally preferred by general public.

Since mass media is the primary vehicle for the dissemination of 'alternative images' rapidly, it is appropriated as a site upon which the 'semiotic wars' (a war of Symbols) is mediated upon. World Wide Web is used by the gay men in a globalised space of India. In the chapter "Media Matters" the writer discusses about the role of news papers, TV shows, radio talks, films and literature in bringing a change in the public perception.. The anonymity provided by internet makes this medium of communication more reliable and prevalent. They can expose their identity at one level and conceal it at another level simultaneously, making them local and global as world wide connectivity and domestic matters intersect. The sense of community in the form of bonding makes them comfortable. One of the participants in the survey says, "With the internet we had a technology that was great in providing weak links- it wasn't oppressive or pushing its attention on us all the time. It was there and we could focus attention on it when we want to" (233). Through the multiple narratives, the writer foregrounds the distinction between the gay scenario in India and the West. Being gay in India, most of these respondents acknowledged carried a unique set of connotations and experiences, mainly because of cultural, social and religious structures, and family pressures that insists on the conformity to traditional patriarchal, hetero normative values. Vidwan, one of the respondents says, "To a large extent, the Indian way of looking at queerness is very different from the way the west sees it. There seems to be a lot more acceptances at least tolerance of queerness in India as long as it does not come in the way of procreative activity." Most of the family members compromise with this and prefer to observe silence on such issues unlike the western countries. In India leaving the home is an option that is rarely exercised. For these homosexual their sexual identity is not as important as other identities. They consider this as only one part of their multiple identities based on their caste, religion, position and place. All these identities intersect with each other to form a complete human being. For many of the interviewees, it was not their sexual identity which was of prime importance but for few it was their religious identity, for others it was their social identity and work identity

Indian gay community appropriates Indian notion of what it means to be straight by celebrating festivals like holi, Raksha Bandan and Iftar. Thus gay Bombay was a part of the global movement in terms of a broad search for identity but different from the variables in either developed or ever developing countries. At the broad macro level there were similar issues but the specific issues are completely different. In general, India has had a tradition of 'benign neglect' of alternate sexualities, a tradition that is very much a part of the Indian mind. The Indian tradition of indifference or deliberate ignorance, is incompatible with the model of the Western gay movement which, like many Western imports finds many consumers in our major cities and which insists on the politics of a gay identity, of a proud or at least defiant assertion of homosexual identity that forces the rest of the society to confront the issue publicly. On the one hand, this assertion is valuable in repealing archaic laws. On the other, if it becomes too flamboyant, there is a danger, like the negative

impact of harming the gay cause. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar writes, "That Hindus are more accepting of 'deviance or eccentricity' than are adherents of Western religions, who typically treat sexual variance as 'anti-social or psychopathological, requiring 'correction' or 'cure'". Hindus, he argues, believe instead that each individual must fulfill their personal destiny (*svadharma*) as they travel the path towards moksha (transcendence)" An attitudinal change in educated Indian mindset is visible due to liberalization and globalization but the important thing is instead of making it a question of visibility or invisibility, we should acknowledge them as a part of the main stream as human beings in a democratic society, Helping people understand their sexuality as a normal variant, providing support for living in predominantly heterosexual world, educating and sensitizing about the health problems through columns written by psychiatrist, physicians and psychologist , medical practitioners can solve the diverse problems of this community Human sexuality is thus, complex and diverse. Various personality characteristics, biological and environmental influences combine in the formation of a particular sexual orientation. Thus, there is a need to change the widely prevalent prejudice and focus on the people's humanity rather than their sexual orientation.

References :

- Appadurai, Arjun Anna, Grassroots, *Globalization and the research Imagination in Public Culture*, vol. 12 (1) Durkhem: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- ----- *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*". New York: Rutledge, 1990.
- John, D'Emilio. "Capitalism and Gay Identity" *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, & Sharan Thompson. New Feminist Library Series. New York: Monthly Review Press. 1983.
- Jageos, Annemarie. *Lesbian Utopics*, New York, Routledge, 1994
- Von Kraft Ebing, Dr, R. (Charles Gilbert Chaddock, Trans. & Rev.) *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886, 1892) with special reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study. New York: Gryphon Edition, 1993.
- Kim Christian Schroeder, *The Best of Both Worlds: Media Audience Research between Thousand Oaks*, CA: Sage Publication, 1999, p.51
- Kakar, Sudhir. An interview 'The judgment helps validation of homosexual identity' www.deccanherald.com › Panorama.
- Shahani, Parmesh. *Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (be) longing in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Sage publications, 2008.
- Ulrich, Karl Heinrich. *The Riddle of "Man-Manly" Love: The Pioneering Work on Male Homosexuality*. New Delhi: Amazon Publications, 1990
- Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sexuality*. London: Tavistock, 1986.

