

Seeking Chaos: The Birth and Intentions of Queer Politics

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Apparently, our lives should not be chaotic. If they are, it is never by our own design, and usually despite our best efforts. The immediate need of the hour then becomes the resolution of this chaos: the imposition ; and I use the word pointedly ; of some kind of order, no matter how much or how little this order may capture of the constantly changing realities of our lives. We don't need to look far for examples of order that are, at best, blurry facsimilies of our original states of being ; just think of the perpendicularly intersecting borders of African nations, carved out so neatly on paper without thought to whether people, as opposed to maps, can be brought into order out of chaos simply through the enforcing of impenetrable lines that keep them from one another by assigning different names, identities, and draping them in different flags.

When it comes to sexuality, order begins with acts of naming and the creation of sexual identities based on presumed sexual behaviour. People become gay *or* straight *or* bisexual *or* lesbian *or* *hijra*. Descriptions that pose as definitions, initiating an endless cycle where no one can remember if the identity came before the practice, or vice versa. The presence of identity labels ; gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, *hijra* ; give an appearance of calm to our sexual universes, and a sense of peace to those who fear sexual chaos as perhaps the worst kind of turbulence there is.

But at what cost does this calm emerge? And is it merely coincidence that after these labels, each of us that are made to belong to one or the other identity seem to increasingly look, talk, behave, and resemble our fellow prisoners? What conversations are possible when language constantly returns us to the markers of identities, and what spaces of

imagination are we unable to see because they lie slightly beyond the limits of what our society's sexual order tells us we are supposed to want?

What would happen if we refused this neat appearance of order? Would sexual chaos result? What would it look like? Where would it live and how would it make its presence felt? Perhaps more importantly, what does our fear of this chaos tell us about how true our current identity-based ordering of the sexual universe really is?

To find the beginnings of answers, I use the story of an intentionally and organically created turbulence: the different notions of what it means to be queer. A newly emerging language within the LGBT (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgendered) circles, the discourse of queer politics challenges distinct and ordered understandings of sex, sexuality, and sexual identity without necessarily offering replacement categories. It does not, in other words, simply seek to play musical labels with one or the other set of distinct sexual identities, but actually seeks to challenge the idea of such neatly sorted identities in the first place.

I tell the story of 'queerness' through the creation of Voices against Section 377, a Delhi-based coalition of different rights-based groups that have come together to challenge India's archaic sodomy law. The arguments I make in favour of a certain kind of sexual disorder ; chaos, if you will ; are, ironically, fairly simple. First, that the ordering principle of identities relies upon rendering invisible the multiple affiliations that each human being has within their lives along demographics other than sexual preference. Second, that the notions of sexual identity often privilege the act of physical sex over more complex and subtle notions of sexual attraction and intimacy that could result, if not so brutally hammered into recognisable constraints, into different kinds of relationships between human beings, which, in turn, could cause a wonderful chaos where people don't enter into pre-determined institutions that invoke the mantle of tradition to perpetuate inequity.

Why Turn to Queer Politics?

PRISM ; or People for the Rights of Indian Sexuality Minorities ; is a Delhi-based political advocacy group known to be one of the most active forums for the rights of LGBT communities in India.

In July 2002, PRISM decided to no longer expand its acronym and remain simply as Prism. It argued: "thinking of LGBT people as minorities only reinforces a mentality in which gay people become a small, disconnected population 'over there', distinct from normal, heterosexual people. At best, we are different and make different 'choices' to lead different 'lifestyles'; at worst, we are deviants. But we are always the 'other', living on our own rainbow planet judged against the normalcy of heterosexual union. We wanted to break this distance, and not look at sexuality through a minority-majority or an us/them framework^{f1}.

In 2003, the first LGBT students group in the history of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi decided that it too would prefer to function as a "queer" students collective, rather than an LGBT space. Most recently, in July 2004 a coalition of groups and individuals came together to form Voices Against Section 377, a self-described queer political forum committed to

"ending discrimination under Section 377", and emphasising the "the links between different axes of power, thereby showing the interconnectedness of homophobia, sexism, racism, and class- and caste-based discrimination"². The unique thing about Voices is that of the dozen or so organisations that are part of the coalition, only a few explicitly identify as being LGBT, the rest being groups that work on issues concerning women, children, health and human rights. Put simply, it is the first time that non-LGBT-identified people have taken on a sustained campaign for queer rights as their own issue.

Indian society repeatedly tells us that there should be only one kind of acceptable desire ; male, heterosexual, and within marriage. Social structures further define and defend what I will call the heteronormative ideal: rigid notions of what it means to be a man or a woman, how the two should relate, and the family unit that should result from such a relationship. Manly men, therefore, must marry feminine women, and have children who bear the caste, class, religion, and property of their father. Heteronormativity and its attendant social privileges represent an ideal kind of social order: it invokes tradition, and is hence internalised and self-imposed as well as directly and openly imposed; it appears all-pervasive since it only recognises unions and social formations that fall within its belief systems, and brands others as 'abnormal'; it is pervasive enough to prevent those that oppose it from locating any fissure through which to insert any criticism.

How do you attack a belief system that is, truly, everywhere? The critical Foucauldian dilemma arises yet again: can you actually change an oppressive system while you're inside it? Queer politics attempts to do precisely this; and, metaphorically, to do it by causing chaos in a system of heteronormativity that needs and demands an unquestioned and hierarchical order of desire in order to survive.

For LGBT activists in India in the late 1990s, the only means to garner attention or support was to speak of queer persons as the victims of human rights violations, and/or of HIV/AIDS. The bodies of LGBT people and their desires were pushed to the periphery, and an acceptable dialogue of rights, violence and disease prevention took its place. This left unchallenged the heteronormative structures that legitimised social conceptions of queer relationships as obscene, sinful, taboo and illegitimate; and of queer people as, at best, the concern of a small minority; or at worst, deviant, abnormal, perverted and/or mentally ill. In other words, one didn't fight for the right of LGBT people to live lives of respect and dignity; one simply fought for their right to not be subject to public and extreme abuse and violence, and to not die of HIV/AIDS.

Even when sexuality was articulated as a politics ; largely using the rhetoric of human rights to speak of "gay rights" ; it was given little legitimacy. In India, alliances with progressive movements were all the more precious for the few activists who could afford to lead openly queer lives and organise around issues of sexuality. Sexuality, however, is placed at the bottom of a hierarchy of oppressions, in the manner that gender once used to be placed. It is considered a lesser politics, one less important than those of poverty, caste, religion, and labour. This fact was made abundantly clear as queer activists sat at a planning meeting for the World Social Forum that was held in Mumbai in 2004, trying to get gender

and sexuality included in the thematic foci of the forum ; only to be told by one of India's most respected trade union leaders that the WSF was a space to "discuss serious issues of development and society, not to traverse through its dark alleyways and shadowy corners".

In the few allied spaces we activists found (for instance, some autonomous women's groups), some of us began to change the language of political assertion. In a July 2003 *parcha* (protest letter), Prism argued that an ethos of "intersectionality ; the linkages between axes of power and oppression, or the interconnectedness of homophobia, sexism, racism, and class and caste-based discrimination" was at the heart of their work. At a meeting of nearly all the major autonomous women's NGOs in Delhi a few months later, activists realised the necessity of this approach. In the first half of 2003, seven cases of double suicides involving young women had been reported in the state of Kerala. The women, most in their mid-20s, left suicide notes stating that they were ending their lives because they were being forced into arranged marriages, and could not bear to be parted from one another. In the autonomous women's groups meeting earlier mentioned, a Prism member raised the issue of lesbian suicides as something women's groups should take on. However, though most of the groups were supportive, they felt that the issue was one that Prism ; being an LGBT organisation ; should raise, and other groups should support. As a Prism member later noted:

Just as only Dalits talk about caste, and only women talk about gender, apparently only homosexuals were supposed to talk about sexuality. As such, it was possible for women's groups to support "our cause" rather than see how queer experiences are trying to challenge the same heteronormative paradigms as the women's movement! Lesbian suicides became about a certain type of woman rather than about the workings of heterosexual and patriarchal control over all women's bodies, as though lesbians in Kerala were unaffected by the workings of class, caste, religion, gender, and other frameworks of difference.³

As LGBT activists found themselves increasingly the only voices willing to speak about sexuality ; homosexual or heterosexual! - and, on a very pragmatic level, as they realised the need for true alliances if the queer movement was ever going to be able to reach mainstream and larger audiences, the need for a change in the language and strategy of LGBT organising became increasingly apparent. This shift was needed precisely in order to realise that the language and order of the system only permitted sexuality and gender to emerge and be discussed in certain ways, at certain places, and within certain boundaries. Queer activists understood that unless they used a new language, one that worked as an assertion against dominant twin orders ; of heteronormativity in mainstream society, and of minority/majority-centred hierarchies of grief and politics in progressive spaces ; queer political activity would always remain marginal. It was within this context that Voices Against Section 377 emerged.

The Birth of Voices

Voices Against Section 377 consists of human rights groups, LGBT groups, women's groups, child rights groups and health groups, uniting to fight a homophobic law. What brings such diverse groups together, and why at this time point of time?

Prism was moving towards an idea of intersectionality ; speaking of sexuality in conjunction with more familiar, wider progressive politics, and moving away from strictly violations-based activism. This realignment increasingly became part of what Prism members began to call a "queer" perspective. Consciously moving away from speaking of LGBT concerns as LGBT-identified people, Prism turned the dialogue to gender and sexuality, and argued, that, from a queer perspective, issues of race/caste/class/gender could not be addressed without examining and addressing issues of sexuality, and vice versa. In effect, queer movements demanded inclusion in other progressive movements by articulating LGBT issues in intersection with other politics. The frame was not about homosexual versus heterosexual, but about how normative understandings of race, caste, class, gender and patriarchy create predictable categories of 'normal' and 'abnormal'; and then penalise those who transgress these bounds. These may include the mapping of sexuality on the bodies of minority Muslim and Dalit women, inter-caste couples, or *hijras*, whose anatomies and subjectivities are publicly ridiculed and castigated in a culture that claims to respect sexuality as a private matter.

This changing articulation has had two effects. First, it has given non-LGBT identified activists a language in which to articulate issues of sexuality not within an "us-versus-them" framework, but as an issue they also claim as their own and simultaneously articulate within their own movements. In the first meeting of the newly-formed coalition Voices Against Section 377, all members were asked to sit together and answer the question "What is sexuality?" The aim of the exercise was to make all present name and think about their own sexuality. Paraphrasing Foucault, it could be said that the aim of the exercise was to keep Voices members from obsessively speaking of their LGBT experiences, a reflex that tended to reify the 'normalcy' of heterosexual behaviour. In a queer framework, gender and sexuality are not confined to the labels of 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual'. The regular order of socially assigned identity is broken. In the free space that results, new voices and new subjectivities become possible. The immediate consequence of this newfound freedom is that non-LGBT identified people can, for the first time, legitimately speak of LGBT rights from positions of authenticity. As the scholar Nivedita Menon has eloquently argued:

...even at its best, society's response to the question of sexuality has been in the form of 'respecting choice'. Such a response, as we have seen, leaves unquestioned heterosexuality as the norm ; that is, 'most of us are heterosexual, but there are others out there who are *either* lesbian *or* gay *or* B (bisexual), T (transgendered), *or* K' (*kothi*). The alphabets proliferate endlessly *outside* the unchallenged heterosexual space. But if we recognise that this 'normal' heterosexuality is painfully constructed and kept in place by a range of cultural, biomedical and economic controls, precisely in order to sustain existing hierarchies of class and caste and gender, then we would have to accept that all of us are ; or have the potential to be ; 'queer'.⁴

Along with new voices, there are new locations. The second effect of a queer articulation is that it has a multiplier effect within other progressive circles. The members of Voices come from different fields of work, and they take issues of same-sex desire back

into movements on health, women's rights, child rights and human rights. Since its inception, Voices has conducted consultative workshops with the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan ; the largest network of health NGOs in India ; on the intersections of sexuality and access to health; with the Network of Autonomous Women's Groups on sexuality and women's movements; with the Psychological Foundation of India on understandings of sexuality within mental health practice, along with public rallies, and outreach efforts in different parts of the city, including at Delhi University. In progressive spaces, queer issues are raised from organisations seen not just as LGBT organisations, but also as existing members of these networks. In its mode of outreach, Voices presents a forum that cannot be dismissed easily.

This chaos does not come without pressures to return a substitute order, or even the old one. When non-LGBT-identified activists represent Voices at various events, gay activists have been known to question these representatives' right to be speak for LGBT communities while being "technically heterosexual". Amongst heterosexually identified people, there is a great deal of hesitancy in being associated with queer politics except in the traditional capacity of distant but supportive allies; to show that there is a genuine need to share politics, but also a need to publicly show that they are not "like us".

Is "queer" an identity, a politics, a community, or a philosophy? Is it limited to same-sex desire, or can anyone embrace it? Do I want people who do not profess same-sex desire to be able to identify as being queer ; what does that give me, and what does that take away? Is "queer" a kind of impulse ; a liberatory moment that lets us see and articulate our politics in a new and subversive way, rather than a parallel system of political thought? The chaotic discussions and speculations around who can be queer and who cannot, whether we are all queer or none of us are, whether queer is an identity or a political perspective or a cult or a knitting group, have in the end served the purpose: they have enabled the emergence of queer politics. They have disrupted essentialist notions of identity within LGBT spaces and within mainstream society. They have reminded us that the calm of neat identity categories conceals as much as it reveals, and they have made new links, created new voices, and opened new spaces for dissent. They have, in other words, created a wonderful turbulence that has brought dynamism and engagement back into queer spaces. What greater success can any political language have?

NOTES

1. PRISM *parcha*, July 2002. On file; copy available upon request.
2. Voices Against Section 377, minutes of meeting, July 2004. On file with author; copy available upon request.
3. Personal communication. Name withheld on request.
4. Nivedita Menon. "How Natural is Normal?" In (eds.) Bhan, G. and A. Narrain, *Because I Have A Voice: Queer Politics in India* (Yoda Press, 2005, New Delhi).