

Workshop on "Sexuality: Issues and Concerns"

Anveshi and the CIEFL Film Club, Hyderabad organized the workshop on "Sexuality: Issues and Concerns" between April 4 – 6, 2003. The idea of the workshop emerged from the many discussions that took place on questions of sexuality at the CIEFL film club meetings, over issues of the film club newsletter and in post classroom conversations. These were discussed at a General Body meeting of Anveshi where it was decided to involve more people and organize a workshop. The workshop therefore sought to bring together individuals who directly or indirectly worked on issues of sexuality with a focus on gay / lesbian issues. A study group, involving members of Anveshi and the CIEFL Film Club, was formed to read and discuss around these issues and also to think through various aspects of the workshop.

The workshop was structured around panels and film screenings. The themes for the five panels were "Languages of Desire", "Location", "Institutional Configuration", "Cinematic Engagements", "Performance", and "Space". About 70 – 80 persons participated in the workshop which was organized at the Inter-University Centre for International Studies.

The first day began with Shefali Jha (CIEFL Film Club) introducing the workshop by providing an overview of the discussions that had led to the organization of the workshop. This was followed by the screening of *Summer in My Veins*. Jayasree Kalathil (Anveshi) chaired the first panel, "Languages of Desire." Gautam Bhan (PRISM, Delhi), Priya Pillai and Shruti Visa (CIEFL Film Club) and R.Srivatsan (Anveshi, Hyderabad) spoke on the panel.

Gautam focused his presentation on the notion of desire and about the need for gays to affirm their difference in terms of who they desire, especially since the mainstream society stigmatizes this desire. Since who a person desires and has sex with defines the homosexual, he argued that reining in this desire in terms of heterosexual norms of monogamy was hypocritical. He argued that the demand for the recognition of gay marriages was in fact a conservative move and was critical of

the fact that gay couples sought to imitate heterosexual mores and morals. Priya Pillai and Shruti Visa spoke about their experience of learning about the existence and politics of alternate sexual cultures after joining up for a course in CIEFL. They spoke of their backgrounds which they now realized reinforced notions of the heterosexual as the norm and any signs of “deviance” were checked. Making friends at CIEFL with individuals with non-heterosexual orientation had opened up a totally new and refreshing way of understanding not just the subject of sexuality but the category of the natural itself. They described this as a learning process which they valued. In his presentation titled “Two Vignettes of Flirting” Srivats drew a distinction between two kinds of flirting: one in which the sender, the message and the destination are clear, and the other in which the signals are thrown into confusion. These two flirtations, he argued are not mutually exclusive but inhere in the other as ever present possibility. He went on to recount in an autobiographical mode three instances of flirting. Reflecting upon these experiences, in each of which he was assuming deeply complex and unfamiliar roles, Srivats suggested that flirting entails a certain destabilization of identities even though its primary mode is serious playfulness. A serious attention in turn to the structure of playful flirtation, he argued, could well yield an insight into the construction of our sexual identities.

After the panel discussion, *Go Fish* was screened.

M.Navaneetha (CIEFL Film Club) chaired the panel on “Location” which included Jaya Sharma (Nirantar and PRISM, Delhi), Ashley Tellis (Delhi), Swathy Margaret and Jenny Rowena (Minuguru, Hyderabad) and Mary John (JNU, Delhi) as the speakers. Jaya Sharma’s presentation explored frameworks within which issues relating to sexuality could be located. In particular she examined the implications of two approaches. One informed by a focus on identity politics and the other that emphasizes the intersectionality of a range of identities such as of gender, class, caste and religion. In his presentation Ashley Tellis argued that the most productive way of addressing questions of sexuality was by drawing upon feminist theorization. He also spoke of the need to study the new spaces, the virtual space offered by the Internet for instance, which provided for ways of expressing desire that were both

emancipatory and conservative. Swathy Margaret referred to the background note of the conference as well as some gay and lesbian anthologies that had been published in recent times to make the point that they were not informed by a dalit perspective. Jenny Rowena critiqued the writings of Muraleedharan on Malayalam cinema to argue that while his work foregrounded the latent homoeroticism between the male characters of certain Malayalam films, the readings did not take caste issues into consideration. Mary John provided an historical overview of the pre-Independence period to point out that the question of sexuality was central to reformist efforts but the engagement with the subject in the public arena became muted later. The women's movement of the 70s and 80s was concerned about the subject but did not take up issues of homosexuality.

The panel on "Institutional Configurations" was chaired by Rekha Pappu (Anveshi). Pramada Menon (CREA, Delhi), Tarunabh Khaitan (National Law School, Bangalore) and Jayasree Kalathil (Anveshi) spoke on the panel. Rekha introduced the panel by underlining the role of institutions in the making of identities and of the consequent need of different kinds of movements to engage with them. Pramada spoke about the work done by NGOs in the area of sexuality in a context in which the State is not sensitive to issues of sexuality. She drew upon the experience of the training provided by CREA to talk about the dilemmas faced by the NGO community. Tarunabh used the case of the National Law School of India University, Bangalore to talk about the institutionalization of heteronormativity in the official discourse of the law school and the resistant sub-culture which makes pedagogy a two way process between the teachers and the taught. Jayasree Kalathil talked about psychiatric sciences' involvement with questions of homosexuality in three main nodes: one, the definition of homosexuality as a medical problem; two, the effort to treat and cure gays, lesbians and bisexuals as individuals with a medical problem; and three, concerns about the mental health of homosexuals.

The Naked Civil Servant was screened after this session.

Satish Poduval (CIEFL Film Club) chaired the panel on “Cinematic Engagements” in which T.Muraleedharan (Thrissur), Shad Naved (CIEFL Film Club) and Tejaswini Niranjana (CSCS, Bangalore) spoke. In his introduction to the panel, Satish discussed some of the critical issues in relation to representation and spectatorship that film theorists, especially following the work of the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, were engaging with. Shad Naved provided an overview of the Indian films in which the subject of homosexuality is central, as a theme or narrative. Muraleedharan spoke about some of the conventional spaces that existed in the Kerala of 1970s for queer subjectivities and expressions. He also traced the transformation through the eighties and nineties and the new visibilities. He sought to examine if there has ever been a strict “heterosexual model” available. Tejaswini took up the question of the stable subject of representation which is a problem for feminism as well as for cinema. She discussed this problem in relation to cinematic spectatorship and the concept of masquerade.

Oranges are not the only fruit was screened in the last session of the day.

The panel on “Performance” was chaired by Lakshmi Kutty (CIEFL Film Club). Susie Tharu (Anveshi and CIEFL) and Anita Cherian (Chennai) spoke on the panel. Lakshmi drew attention to the range of performances that one gives as well as witnesses on an everyday basis. Not all of these she pointed out are valid. Some draw attention to themselves as performances while others function to detract and deflect attention. In her presentation, Anita argued for analyses that do not isolate and emphasize particular identities but are able to take into account a whole range of interconnected social and political issues. She argued in particular for responses which were sensitive to the equations between different groups and the kinds of marginality that impact on them. In her presentation Susie referred to the work of Derrida to elaborate upon the kind of mutuality that exists between performance and law; that the law becomes the law in our performance of it. She emphasized that the law does not exist outside the space of performance and in fact that the law reinvents itself in its tension with performance. Susie revisited the film *The Naked Civil Servant* that

had been screened the previous day to illustrate her argument about law and performance.

Arvind Narrain (Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore), Chayanika (Stree Sangam, Mumbai), T.Muraleedharan (Thrissur) and Chatura (OLAVA, Pune) spoke in the panel on "Space". Shefali Jha (CIEFL Film Club) chaired the session. *GAEA Girls* was screened after the film. Arvind traced the history of Section 377 of the Criminal Procedure Code which is used to prosecute gays and which has become the subject of much discussion in recent times. He referred to the colonial context in which the law was codified and then focused his presentation on the recent mobilizations against this law by the gay rights movement. Chayanika drew upon her experiences of working with Stree Sangam and other women's groups in Mumbai to highlight the kinds of questions that have come up in relation to the issue of sexuality within the women's movement. She stressed on the possibilities of a more productive dialogue between feminism and the gay / lesbian movement, especially on the grounds of their respective critiques of compulsory heterosexuality. Muraleedharan's presentation was on the anthology of short stories in Malayalam that he is in the process of editing. The anthology expected to be published in Malayalam and English would include stories written by some well known writers (none identified by themselves as queer), some fairly old and some recent, all dealing with queer relationships. He located queerness in the socio-cultural context of Kerala. Chatura drew on the experience of OLAVA (Organised Lesbian Alliance for Visibility and Action) to reflect on aspects of homosexuality that are found acceptable to some progressive groups while the same groups would use other aspects of their homosexuality to penalize the same individuals. She also spoke about the various activities taken up by OLAVA.