

# WOMEN'S SEXUALITY IN THE MODERN ETHNO-NATIONAL STATE

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Contemporary conceptions of feminine sexuality merge science, myth, medicine, and politics. Despite the expansion of medical, technological, policy and scientific discourses on women's reproductive health in the last two decades, women's sexuality is still subject to various magico-religious beliefs about pollution and danger, as well as, cultural and moral regulation. Modernity and science, encapsulated in the increased participation of women in national development, and in the proliferation of contraceptive and reproductive technologies which have given women greater control over their bodies, have then not significantly altered deep patterns of societal control over women's sexual expression.

In a majority of South Asian countries among young women their own sexuality is a subject of shame, embarrassment, silence or uneasy humor. Women who express their sexuality outside the norms of heterosexual marriage, either by having lesbian relationships or by conceiving outside marriage, are more often than not considered immoral or deviant.

This article explores how contraceptive and reproductive technologies, national family planning and development discourses, as well as debates over women's roles and "rights", are slowly transforming constructions of women's sexuality. It also considers some of the reasons for continuing and emergent patterns of familial, national, and State control of women's bodies and sexual lives.

## Women in the Ethnic/National Community

Historically, women have been the subjects of attempts to control their sexuality for the greater good of the family, nation and State. They have been constructed as keepers of national culture and as "mothers" of the nation. Yet, as Virginia Woolf once argued, women have never been considered full citizens. The patriarchal State disenfranchised and discriminated against them and their offspring if they married or conceived outside the racial/ethnic community, while accepting the offspring of men who married outside the ethno-national community.

Many of the issues which were highlighted earlier this century in Woolf's writings on the ambivalent position of women within the modern nation-state persist today. Others have been redressed. In England laws of nationality and citizenship for English women's spouses and children have been altered to compare with those of men, yet the law equivocates with regard to immigrants. Patterns of national/ethnic

discrimination based on patriarchal and patrilineal kinship and descent structures, remain in many parts of Africa, Latin America and Asia. In Sri Lanka for instance, the foreign spouses of Sri Lankan men are eligible for citizenship, while the non-national spouses of Sri Lankan women are not.

Gender biased citizenship and immigration laws often reflect the interpellation of nationalist anxieties about racial purity with anxieties about women's sexuality and reproductive roles within the national community. Thus the imagery of ethnic, racial and nationalist conflict is replete with sexual stereotypes, while the speeches of nationalists are peppered with references to "violations of our sisters and mothers" and exhortations to "protect our women". The obverse play of nationalist anxieties manifests in the rape and (ethnic) contamination of women of "other" communities, as has been the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In situations of ethnic conflict women's sexuality and fertility becomes the locus of heightened communal violence on the one hand, and attempts at scrutiny and control on the other.

Women, as the bearers of children and the reproducers of the nation play an important role in the nationalist imagination. Thus the rhetoric of communalism and nationalism is full of the increase of numbers of "other" communities and the excessive breeding of the "lesser races". Recently the nationalistic periodical, the *Vishva Hindu Parishad*, argued that by the year 2000, due to polygamy Muslims will outnumber Hindus in India - a statistical impossibility given current census figures. In Sri Lanka, reports have been circulating that Muslim women are being pressured to stop contraceptive use and to produce more children in the contested East Coast Provinces (personal communication). Similarly, in Singapore where the State openly plays race and class politics ever since the birth rates of ethnic Chinese declined, wealthy Chinese women from the dominant ethnic community have been reprimanded for underbreeding and thereby betraying the nation. The former Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, even went as far as to level an extraordinary charge against Chinese mothers: he accused them of "imperiling the country's future by willfully destroying patterns of biological reproduction" (Heng, G and Devan, J, 1992, 344). Similar attempts to channel women's sexuality in the name of the nation are evident in countries such as Sudan, Nigeria, Egypt, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, where extremist and fundamentalist forces have state support. In these countries, women's sexuality has become the locus of ethnic nationalist anxieties about population depletion.



On the other hand, in countries like China and India women have been the targets of government efforts to reduce population growth. Harsh population reduction policies have been enforced through forced sterilizations, government removal of family subsidies, and the harassment of women who have more than one child. Additionally, in both China and India, state strictures combined with the high cultural value placed on male children have made for high levels of female infanticide.

Ironically, the availability of new reproductive technologies and technological innovations like amniocentesis and sonograms has proven a mixed blessing for women who live in highly patriarchal communities. While enabling the screening and selection of unborn infants, such technologies have raised unprecedented social and moral dilemmas for Indian and Chinese women. Though these technologies may provide greater choice for women — i.e. the ability to select a child's gender—they also mean that women have often had to make impossible choices between destroying a female foetus in the hope of having a male son and heir. As such, it is arguable that the availability of sonograms has furthered communal pressure on women by enabling familial and communal scrutiny and intervention in hitherto inaccessible aspects and processes of women's reproduction. Women facing societal pressures for a boy child often end up aborting female foetuses at great emotional, physical and psychological cost to themselves<sup>1</sup>. This is not of course, to deny that in other instances women have benefitted from such screening technologies.

## Control of Women's Sexuality

In the past two decades, women have been both the agents and victims of a proliferation of scientific and pseudo-scientific discourses on their sex, sexuality, its ideological elaboration and practice. Simultaneously, women's sexuality has become the subject of unprecedented research and indirect control by states, medical institutions and other impersonal powers. Population policies rather than women's health and well-being have determined what kinds of birth

control and contraceptive devices are available to women. Both development imperatives and ethnic nationalisms have provided a strong impetus for the increase in State and communal attempts to control women's sexuality.

For women living in highly patriarchal societies then advances in contraceptive/reproductive technology have provided mixed blessings. New reproductive technologies have opened terrains of women's sexuality and reproductive cycles for greater communal scrutiny and control, while they have also freed them from unwanted pregnancies. This has been evident in recent debates regarding women's rights to abortion, the debates as to what grounds abortion might be sanctioned, and the period of time in which abortions might be legally carried out in Britain and the US.

The articulation of female and feminine sexuality in biological and reproductive terms has enabled the shift from a familial and kin-based pattern of patriarchal control over women's sexuality to that of State and/or collective communal control. This has been the case despite and ironically because of advances in reproductive health and technologies which once promised to give women unprecedented control over their bodies and thus their sexual expression. Nationalist anxieties about the role of women as the purveyors of ethnic purity, and the guardians of national tradition and culture have also configured modern constructions of women's sexuality.

Following Michael Foucault (1980) then we might argue that the bounds of women's sexuality has expanded. The female body has become increasingly articulated within the public sphere for indirect State and/or communal regulation. More often than not such regulation has taken place on the grounds that their off-spring are members of the national community. As such, women's sexuality becomes visible as a shifting cultural field rather than a biological given. ■

## Notes

1. *Country Reports for Human Rights Practices* for 1993. United States Department of State, February 1994.

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History and collective memory are an inseparable part of any culture; but the past is not and must not to be allowed to become the dominant element determining the future of society and the destiny of a people.

Amos Elon, From the Politics of Memory,  
*The New York Review of Books*  
October 1993.