

# India



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**B**ecause of the tremendous silence which surrounds the issue of lesbianism, it is difficult to know where, when, and by whom the human rights of lesbians living in India are being violated. Lesbian voices are not being heard, and as this report will illustrate, this silence is in itself a human rights violation. Finding the space to talk openly is rarely possible, and the fear of exposure is so great that very little meaningful discussion of lesbianism can take place.

This report is based on the following sources: collected articles and news clippings in the Sakhi Lesbian Resource Center in New Delhi; letters from lesbians in different parts of India who have written to Sakhi; personal accounts from lesbians who have contacted Sakhi; and conversations with lesbians within and outside the women's movement. It is by no means a complete picture of the situation, especially when it comes to how class, caste, and geographic settings (i.e., rural versus urban) affect the choices and experiences of lesbians in India. However, one can say, most definitely,

that the silence surrounding lesbianism affects women in every sector of society. The heterosexualization of Indian culture and society denies all women the right to choose and freely live their lives.

#### FAMILY PRESSURE

The family plays a significant role in prohibiting lesbianism. Most Indian women who do not marry are dependent upon the financial and social support of their families and are thus prevented from asserting their independence. Some middle-class women are exposed to alternative ways of living and

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have the financial means to attain them. Often, however, financial resources become meaningless in the face of the pressure they feel to remain with their families. Privacy, freedom of movement, and freedom of association all become difficult for lesbians living with parents and family.

Most Indian lesbians have been pressured to marry by their families. Some find a way to resist; others get married as a result of being coerced or simply because they have not considered the alternatives. Marriage is instilled in the minds of young girls as the focal point of a woman's life. It is an expected duty, an unquestionable norm, and inescapable for the majority of Indian women. In certain castes, it is still considered a dishonor to the family if a girl is not married by the time her menses begin. Child marriages are still arranged, sometimes prior to the birth of the child.

The societal and familial pressures that force many lesbians into marriage contribute to the invisibility of lesbians in Indian society and culture. A statement that is made repeatedly is that "there are no lesbians in India." Such statements can be made because although some women have chosen to take the risks involved in living openly as lesbians, many others have been forced to assimilate into heterosexual norms, all the while recognizing their true sexuality and suppressing their feelings, often for years. Letters received by Sakhi illustrate the frequency with which this happens. Many of the letters are from lower middle-class women, in smaller towns and cities.

A woman from Lucknow writes:

I am a 33-year-old married bi-sexual woman. Although I am a married woman...from my early adolescence I was very much attracted to people of my own sex but at that time this type of feelings could not be revealed to anyone, as I belonged to a very conservative family...<sup>1</sup>

A woman from Bangalore writes:

I was attracted to boys but...five and a half years [ago] I met a girl. (She is from another city.) I took [an] instant liking for her and so did she. We fell in love and got involved emotionally and physically.

Though madly in love I felt the society would never accept our relationship. So I decided it would be better if we split. I told her this and gave her [a] reason (that I was involved with a boy). She had depression for almost two years after this because she just could not accept it.

I did try in [the] last two years to get involved with boys and finally have decided to get married to a boy who has proposed marriage to me...[The problem is that] I really feel that I am in deeply love with that girl and if you ask me what I want then I would want to spend my life with her [be]cause I feel happiest when I am with her...

If I marry I will be making my parents happy but I will not be truly happy. If I decide to spend my life with her I will be the happiest person but I will make my parents unhappy.

Please tell me what I should do...I am proud of this relationship and I do not feel guilt or inferior because I am a lesbian [be]cause this relationship gives me pleasure as much as any other relationship would give.<sup>2</sup>

The following letter appeared in Trikone, a South Asian lesbian and gay newsletter published in the United States:

...My mother thought I'd be better off married...How come there is no one else in Vellore who is lesbian? It did feel strange to be the only person to feel this way. Do you know of some one just to talk to? It felt very lonely and I was so crowded with my thoughts that I agreed to marriage. Perhaps it will work.<sup>3</sup>

Sakhi has been in contact with lesbians who have tried to leave home, been emotionally blackmailed and gone back, and with others who have struggled and succeeded in becoming independent from their families. A lesbian couple who came to Sakhi for support reported that their families had prohibited them from communicating with one another, and that one had been forced into marriage. One woman who contacted Sakhi said her family would kill her if they discovered her lesbianism. Sakhi has heard of few cases where parents are supportive.

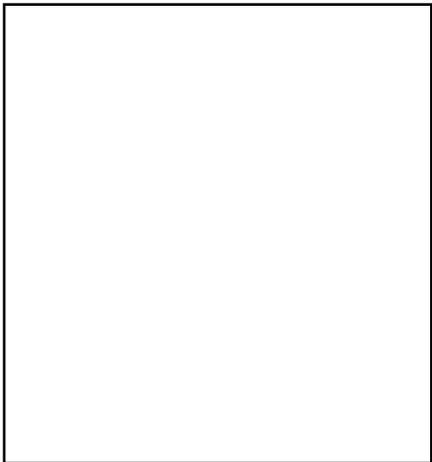
Because of the consequences that many lesbians face if their sexuality is revealed to their family, they are especially vulnerable to blackmail and other forms of harassment. One woman who contacted Sakhi reported being terrorized by anonymous phone calls and letters threatening to expose her lesbian identity. Some letters contained pornographic images of lesbians and, purporting to be from Sakhi, tried to blackmail her to "Join our gay organisation." Her main fear

was that her family would find out she was lesbian. One Sakhi member has received obscene telephone calls, including a death threat.

LAWS USED AGAINST LESBIANS

While the pressure to conform to heterosexual norms does not, in general, come directly from the state, legal pressure can in certain situations be brought to bear. Same-sex sexual relations are illegal under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code:

OF UNNATURAL OFFENCES: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life or imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend for ten years and shall be liable to fine.



When the law was instituted in India in the 1830s under British colonial rule,

The marriage of Lila Chadva and Tarunkumar

lesbian sexuality was not even conceived of as a threat, and the law was intended to apply to acts of sodomy and bestiality. Few have investigated the implication of the law for lesbians, as the sentences reported have all involved men. However, only those cases that come to the level of the higher court are recorded. Furthermore, as the "offense" is non-bailable, the "offender" may be arrested and languish in prison until such time as the case is decided, and the law

can thus be used as a mechanism of coercion.

In 1990, a case was reported in which Section 377 was used against Lila Chadva and her lover, Tarunkumar, a female-to-male transsexual. The two had been lovers since 1985. In 1987, Tarunkumar underwent sex reassignment surgery, and in December 1989 the couple got married. However, Chadva's father petitioned the Gujarat High Court to annul the marriage on the grounds that it was a lesbian relationship and therefore illegal under Section 377. The writ petition contended that "Tarunkumar...possesses neither the male organ nor any natural mechanism of cohabitation, sexual intercourse, and procreation of children. Adoption of any unnatural mechanism does not create malehood and as such Tarunkumar is not a male."<sup>4</sup>

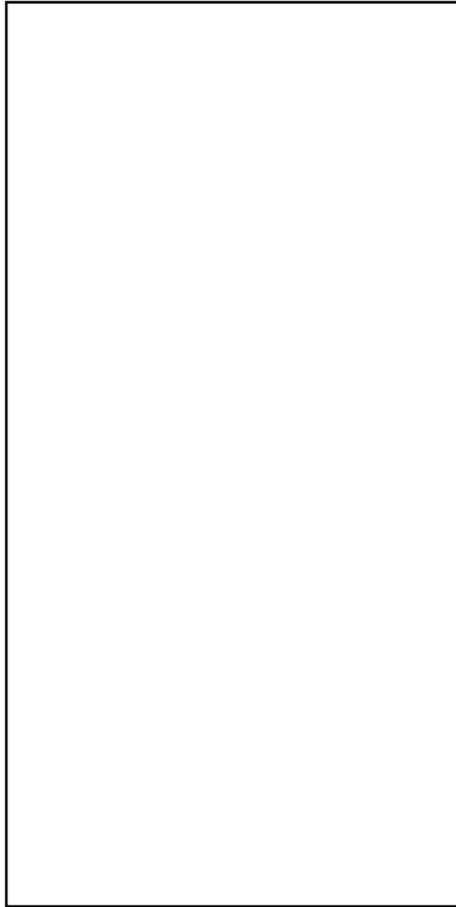
The petition was accepted by the court. While the case subsequently disappeared from the public eye, the fact that the high court was willing to accept the petition demonstrates the coercive potential of the law. While this particular case involved a female-to-male transsexual, Sakhi is aware of other reports of the threatened usage of the law to break up relationships between women. Such cases are very difficult to document because, due to the stigmatization of lesbianism, many women are reluctant to admit publicly that such coercion has occurred.

Even when Section 377 is not directly enforced, the criminalization of lesbianism contributes indirectly to the abuses that lesbians endure. Beyond the barriers that all women face to securing state intervention when they are the victims of domestic violence, lesbians also must contend with the psychological impact of a law that defines them as criminal and abnormal. Anti-lesbian violence is almost never reported to the police, although Sakhi has received reports of battering, rape by male family members, and murder.<sup>5</sup>

#### LESBIAN MARRIAGES

As the examples above make clear, women who want to

spend their lives together face many obstacles. However, a few courageous women, all from working-class backgrounds, have made the news in recent years for attempting to marry their women lovers. The most widely publicized case was that of 20-year-old Leela Namdeo and 29-year-old Urmila Shrivastava, two police-women with the 23rd Battalion of the Special Armed Forces. The couple had undergone a Hindu marriage ceremony in December 1987 and were discharged from the force when news of



Gita Darji and Kishori Shah.

the marriage spread. Their commander was quoted as saying "Urmila and Leela were sacked because their conduct was unbecoming of a police constable. It could lead to indiscipline and what is more, others could learn from their example too. It could lead to problems in the battalion too. They would want to sleep in the same bed, share food from the same plate and things like that which cannot be allowed."<sup>6</sup>

The two women appealed to the top authorities of the state police to reinstate them, but their requests were denied. The case attracted a great deal of media attention,

and most of the coverage perpetuated common stereotypes. Urmila was portrayed as the "husband" and Leela as the "wife," and their relationship was explained to be the result of tragic, lonely lives. Faced with intense media scrutiny, the two women denied that they had any sexual relationship and explained that their close friendship was one of many such partnerships among the women in the barracks.<sup>7</sup>

Although Leela and Urmila's respective families condoned their marriage, other women who have attempted to marry each other have faced strong opposition. In the 1993 case of 18-year-old Vinoda Adwekar and her 21-year-old lover, Rekha Chaudhary, the respective families joined forces with the police and the marriage registrar to keep the couple apart. Four years after they had first met each other, the two women announced to their respective families that they were planning to get married. When their families expressed their opposition, the two fled to the nearby town of Chandrapur and submitted their application to the Registrar of Marriages. On the day that they were to present themselves to the Registrar, a crowd of hundreds gathered at the court. While Rekha was left waiting outside, Vinoda was brought inside the building and subjected to arguments against the relationship from the Police Superintendent, the Registrar, and her family. As the papers reported, "It took three hours for [Police Superintendent] Karkhare to talk Vinoda out of it [but he succeeded], much to the relief of the parents of both the girls, district officials and the large gathering that waited eagerly for the judgment."<sup>8</sup> This case shows the lengths that officials, families, and communities will go to to stop two women from choosing to live their lives together.

#### LESBIAN SUICIDES

Another indication of the difficulties that lesbian couples

face is the significant number of double suicides that are reported in the press. The most well-known case is that of Gita Darji and Kishori Shah, two nurses in their mid-twenties who lived in the small town of Meghraj in Gujarat. The two hanged themselves rather than allow Gita's marriage to separate them from one another. Love letters between them found after their deaths revealed that the man Gita had recently married abhorred their relationship and, with the help of Gita's brother, forced her to apply for a transfer to another town.

One researcher has pointed out the large number of such cases reported in newspapers in the southern state of Kerala. The reports demonstrate little understanding of the reasons that such suicides may occur and little sensitivity to the women themselves.<sup>9</sup> Those who seek to explain such suicides in the context of compulsory heterosexuality are silenced, as was the case when the researcher in question displayed articles on lesbian suicide at a recent conference on gender and sexuality in Kerala. An hour after he put the articles up for viewing they were removed.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

These examples show the obstacles that lesbians encounter when they reveal their love for other women. However, those who remain silent also suffer consequences. An autonomous, unmarried woman in India is seen as an outsider. Within their families, schools, workplaces, and social groups, single women are told they are not "real women" and are asked when they will be married. For many lesbians, this means facing a daily struggle of being "different." Denying one's lesbianism to oneself and others, leading a double life, having to suppress one's true sexuality, constantly feeling on guard and afraid—these constraints take their toll in a number of different ways. Regardless of class and caste, the sense of isolation and the fear of being ostracized impacts all women who are lesbians. Isolation can lead to

depression and to drug and alcohol use, and lesbians receive little assistance from mental health professionals. Within the psychiatric profession, homosexuality is widely viewed as a deviant sexual behavior. One woman psychologist has informed Sakhi that "curative" therapy is practiced, including aversion therapy. Although sensitive to lesbian and gay issues, she herself believes in the potential for some patients to "convert" to heterosexuality.<sup>10</sup>

#### INVISIBILITY

It is virtually impossible to find any literature, films, or art by, for, or about lesbians in India. While the last several years the issue of lesbianism has received increased media attention, most of the coverage echoes the general social attitudes that view lesbianism as a curiosity, an illness, or an abnormality.<sup>11</sup> Where representations of lesbians exist in popular culture, they are generally voyeuristic. In Indian films, which are filled with violence, rape, and macho culture, women's sexuality is expressed within only a very narrow range of acceptable roles and any non-stereotypical female characters, such as the tomboy in the film *Nadaan*, are eventually shown their "true" sexuality, by ending up in the arms of the hero. When lesbian characters do appear, such as in the depiction of a relationship between two women in Vijay Tendulkar's film *Subah*, they are portrayed as abnormal.

As opposed to the contemporary invisibility of lesbians, ironically, there exist rich histories of lesbian and other non-heterosexual sexualities in ancient Indian culture. If one looks, it is possible to find images and documentation of women-to-women bonding, feminine culture, and goddess traditions in temple sculptures, historical texts, miniature paintings, etc. In many temples, women in various sexual positions together indicates that, at one time, heterosexuality was perhaps only one of many diverse sexualities. Over the centuries, the images have been either destroyed, plas-

tered over, or heterosexualized, thus creating the almost perfect denial of their existence. Similarly, modern translations of ancient texts, such as the Rig Veda, have been heterosexualized.

#### LESBIANS AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Very little room exists within the women's movement for lesbians to comfortably reveal their sexual identity, and lesbians have only rarely been recognized as a marginalized group whose issues must be included in the work of women's organizations. Many lesbians working within the movement fear that if their sexual orientation becomes known they will be marginalized and shunned.

The women's movement has dealt with the politics of sexuality in various ways—under the banners of women's health, violence against women, reproductive health rights, and "single" women. Campaigning to raise the status of single women of poorer classes has meant focusing on those women who are not within the institution of marriage—widowed, divorced, or unmarried women. Creating spaces where these women can share their experiences and build a sense of self-worth in a society that looks down upon unmarried women has been an important contribution of the movement. Lesbian sexuality, however, is rarely mentioned. India's foremost feminist magazine, *Manushi*, has never carried any articles on lesbian experience. Even feminists who are themselves lesbians feel the necessity to censor themselves at women's conferences in India. They are critical to a degree of issues like the power of the family or marriage, yet remain careful not to talk of lesbianism as an alternative to the heterosexual norm.

Recently, some cracks have begun to appear in the wall of silence. The National Women's Conference in Calicut, 1991, saw the first-ever meeting among women who stand outside the institution of marriage. Many other women felt threatened by this group claiming space for themselves,

some saying married women were in many ways "single" due to the loneliness they felt in their marriages. In January 1994, another women's conference took place in Tirupathi. This time, in a workshop on sexuality, many women spoke of their lesbian relationships, feelings, and experiences, and various discussions took place around the issue of lesbianism. The atmosphere was highly charged as women, many for the first time, exchanged stories and spoke of their pleasure and pain. Objections were raised by some of the women present, who deemed lesbianism as either immoral or abnormal. One particular group of women went to the extent of trying to pass a resolution at the conference stating that lesbianism should not be promoted as normal. Others tried to encourage women to shout slogans such as "down with lesbianism!" In the evening a lesbian-only meeting was held to continue the sharing, networking, and bonding without such interference or harassment.<sup>12</sup>

Another indication of change came when Vimla Farooqui, a leading member of the National Federation of Indian Women, made a public statement earlier this year calling for the Prime Minister to put a stop to a gay men's conference in Bombay. This opened up space for dialogue on the issue of lesbian and gay rights, and one feminist group in Delhi took action by writing to other women's groups for comments and support over the issue. Many positive letters were sent in opposition to Farooqui's statement, which demonstrates that there is potential within the movement for more discussion on lesbian rights in the future.

#### LESBIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Sakhi, the only openly lesbian organization in India, is based in New Delhi. Sakhi works to increase visibility of lesbians and lesbian culture within India, to provide a space for lesbians to identify with each other and counteract lesbophobia within India. The group was started in 1991 by four women who established a library of lesbian books and infor-