

Individual Session –
Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Literature and Culture

Blogosphere as a Source of Alternative Sex Pedagogy

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Abstract:

I examine the Indian sex blogosphere as a medium of informal sex education in the present times. The sex blogosphere is part of the digital sex industry. It educates the netizens on sex and sexuality. I analyze sex blogs in lifestyle magazines and commercial websites. Both spaces allow some autonomy to talk about sex, especially to women. It is no secret that discussing women's sexuality is taboo in India. There is no formal medium of sex education as such. In such an environment, the sex blogosphere is essential in enhancing knowledge of sex. Such knowledge does not necessarily stereotype women's sexual roles. The sex culture that emerges from the blogosphere is an alternative to traditional cultures. I infer that the sex knowledge produced through this medium is informal and customized. The sex blogosphere presents sex as a lifestyle choice. It is an essential teaching for Indian women trained to practice sex as a marital duty.

Keywords: Informal, Alternative, Sex pedagogy, Lifestyle, Blogosphere

Introduction: Conversations on Sex

It is no secret that talking about sex in India is taboo. It is valid for both men and women. However, the meanings associated with women's sexuality are far more implicating. Our social norms reject and repress any conversation about women's sexuality and desire in public spaces. It would not be an overstatement to say that most of the time, women are not free to discuss sex, desire, and intimacy, even within private spaces. The blogosphere is gradually changing this culture. I claim so because the blogosphere allows both the readers and the writers to remain discreet. Maintaining secrecy about sex is crucial in traditional societies like ours. Especially for women because they are the primary victims of sexual normativity, regulations, and moral policing. Blogs allow writers to express their desires, choices, and fantasies. Readers can explore their secret desires that are otherwise treated as unspeakable among family and friends. The blogosphere has the potential to fill up this gap. It provides information that is not necessarily traditional. The blogosphere works around generating thoughts, practices, and products that are somewhat non-traditional. By sex blogosphere, I mean the collective of sex blogs, services, and products related to sex available on the internet. The sex blogosphere has a specific target audience, that is, netizens. The sex blogosphere is more than advice on sex positions. It is the promise of a non-traditional sex lifestyle. The sex blogosphere works toward building a fantasy of pleasure. It presents practices and products as means to achieve the promised fantasy land. Blogs discuss the scope of experimenting with people's everyday life, changing traditional practices, and finding alternatives. The internet and social networking sites make netizens active participants. They are not mere observers. Shilpa Phadke (2005) says modern women in India are expected to be sexy and respectable/ moral simultaneously. She says, "women have to be both sexually desirable and sexually virtuous" (p. 81). Women who fail to reproduce the sexy and respectable image in their self-expression risk becoming targets of moral policing. I think the blogosphere is a bridge for Indian women who wants to speak about their sexuality publicly without being necessarily labeled as sex symbols.

In this paper, I analyze blogs from the Indian sex blogosphere. By Indian blogosphere, I mean blogs produced for Indian audiences with local tastes, persuasions, desires, and expectations. The blogosphere dedicated to writing about sex and promoting the sex industry is diverse. I list a few

different types of blogs that emerge from the Indian blogosphere. Popular lifestyle magazines such as *Cosmopolitan India*, *Elle*, *New Woman*, and *Femina* publish blogs on relationships, intimacy, and sex. It promotes a lifestyle of sexual wellness and satisfaction. The more significant point in these magazines is about sexual hygiene. Talking about sexual hygiene is an inevitable part of a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Sometimes lifestyle magazines talk about hygiene without addressing more nuanced aspects of sex, such as intimacy. Sex is addressed but without stirring any uncomfortable or prejudiced discussions.

A radically different genre of sex blogs also exists on the internet. These blogs are published on adult e-commerce sites. These sites mainly sell sex products such as condoms, sex toys, lingerie, lubricants, etc. These blogs are written by English-educated people whom these companies hire to write erotic content. The primary focus of these websites is to promote their products as lifestyle options. Some websites are as follows: *Kaamastra.com*, *Lovetreats*, and *Condombazaar*. All these websites are oriented to promote and sell products related to sex. Each of them has a section dedicated to blogs, and they focus on lifestyle choices such as therapy, release, and consumption. Interestingly, some of these blogs present a nuanced understanding of sex. In the blogosphere, sex is not exclusively about hygiene or gratification. Instead, it is about mutual pleasure. They also promote products that enable the partners to come together and closer in ways they have not experienced before. Take the example of a blog on sex games from *Kaamastra* (“Sexy game with Priya”). It says, “We both stopped when it was getting intense. There was a whole night ahead of us and no need to rush things...In a fit of the sexual craze, she pulled me up and kissed me, tasting herself”. The mutual release of sexual energy is a lifestyle choice promoted by these blogs. It also suggests that mutuality becomes complete by using their products. In this case, it is “sex games.”

Sex blogosphere and phonography: Subtle differences

I argue that the sex blogosphere is an alternative source of knowledge on sex. Bloggers express and assert their sexual identity publicly via the blogosphere. Writing about a highly prejudiced topic, such as sex, in a public space is empowering. The voices of ordinary netizens with various sexual preferences become heard via sex blogs. It is an unprecedented phenomenon.

The sex blogosphere is also one of the most accessed mediums of sex pedagogies in the present times. However, all the contents on the internet do not have the same pedagogical value. There are problems in cyberspace, for example, pornography. I do not consider pornography as a potential source of knowledge on sex. It is consumed for quick gratification. There are a lot of different arguments about pornography. For right-wing conservative moralists, pornography is unacceptable because it is concerned with lust. Spracklen provides an analysis of feminists' standing on pornography. Elizabeth Fraterrigo and Nancy Whittier say that left-wing feminists supported the ban on pornography because porn is produced for male consumption. It degrades female bodies. Susanne Kappeler proposes that liberal left-wing feminists defend pornography as a product of the capitalist market. Post-feminists took the stand that pornography is not voyeuristic.

Feona Attwood says pornography is not problematic as long as women have equal control over the market. And they are free to consume these contents for pleasure (qtd. in Spracklen 180). Consumers of pornography look for a quick means to satisfy a tendency for fetish. They tend to forget that the people on screen are essentially actors. It is inhumane to replicate the same with partners in real life. Hence, pornography creates delusions about sex, especially among men. Pornography is much unlike the sex blogosphere. Pornography reinforces sexual stereotypes at a visual dimension. Men learn to flex their masculinity in bed. At the same time, women learn to play their roles as objects of pleasure. Pornography is another medium through which men train to become pleasure-seeking and women become pleasure-giving bodies. These gendered roles are highly misleading. It is not to say that the sex blogosphere does not show symptoms of sexual stereotypes whatsoever. It exists in the realm of the blogosphere as well. However, pornography impacts the audiences' psychological and behavioral orientation to sex. These are reasons for dismissing pornography as a reliable source of sexual knowledge.

Analytic Technique: Raisborough's "Social Change" Theory

I analyze blogs from the Indian sex blogosphere to develop an alternative understanding of sexuality. I refer to Jayne Raisborough's concept to interpret the sex revolution that happens online via the blogosphere. In cyberspace, a shift from a "homogenized self" to an "individualized self" is evident.

Jayne Raisborough (2011) calls this a social change. She points out three reasons for this social change, namely, “detraditionalization,” “deindustrialization,” and “globalization.” “Detraditionalization” refers to the loosening bond between the self and the family, self and traditional norms. “Deindustrialization” means the shift from an economy of production to an economy of consumption. The market now has many “cultural intermediaries.” “Globalization” brought social changes by interconnecting the “self” with cultures, information, and materials from across the world via technology. New media causes these lifestyle changes. It is reflected in one’s idea of sexuality very well. The new media significantly transforms the way netizens perceive sexuality, especially regarding women. In the blogosphere, women can express their personalized idea of desire and intimacy that traditional media do not allow. In traditional media, women’s sexual roles are epitomized as obedient lovers and pleasuring wives. I deploy Raisborough’s framework to analyze the ongoing transformations that happen in the sex blogosphere around understanding women’s sexuality. Such a change empowers women as they take charge of their sexual representation to a large extent.

Detraditionalization of women’s sexuality

In India, one’s traditions guide their idea of self. Sexuality is not an exception. Traditionally, young people are trained to treat sex as taboo. Women’s sexuality has always been repressed. Women connect to sex as their marital duty.

In contrast to such normative ideas, the sex blogosphere presents women with alternative ways to connect with their sexuality. Netizens, in general, and women, in particular, move away from the traditional beliefs on sex by participating in the blogosphere. Participation in the blogosphere can range from writing, reading, and adopting lifestyle changes. Each process contributes to the “detraditionalization” of the sexualized self. Take the example of Aleena Darwesh, a sex blogger from India. She writes in her confessional blog, “An Indian girl in a sex toy shop. How does that sound to you?”. She is assertive about her identity as a sex blogger without a hint of shame. Darwesh points out that her identity as an Indian woman doesn’t go well with the lifestyle; she chose to define her self-narrative. An Indian woman making a living via writing about sexuality is perhaps preposterous. She defies traditions that are seen as essential to be qualified as a good dau-

ghter, a good wife, and a good mother. Darwesh openly challenges the traditional image of moral women. She also asks, "How does that sound to you?" It is a rhetorical question. And she does not ask this question because she wants to be informed about people's opinions. Instead, she establishes that she has broken away from traditions. Sex blogging is Darwesh's alternative lifestyle. Darwesh breaks away from traditional notions of women's gendered role in sex. She pursues her idea of sex by writing sex blogs on a public platform. This lifestyle perhaps also caters to the fantasy of sex nurtured by the netizen.

Darwesh writes: "In India, we need to talk more about sex, and that's the mission I have taken on my shoulders." She deploys the blogosphere as the medium for her more significant endeavor of breaking the traditional idea of the feminine sexual self. The language she chooses to write her confession is banter. Darwesh is a critique of the hypocritical stands of Indian society on sex. Indian women are taught to desexualize their bodies. Such traditional ideals are challenged by Darwesh's claim to her sexuality and body. She simply says that she is a woman who is passionate about sex. And she turns her passion into a profession by writing about sex on the internet. Via sex blogging, she is making herself heard and validating her idea of sex, sexuality, and desire. Her alternative understanding of sex is non-homogeneous, non-traditional, alternative, and individualized. Writing about personal experiences of sex is the most effective way of bringing changes in the Indian sex culture. India does not have enough platforms and spaces where women can talk about their experiences of sex without being judged. Women like Darwesh creates that space in the realm of the blogosphere. She does not seem fearful of being judged. Her lifestyle choice is an example of "detraditionalization" that Raisborough speaks about. In the next section, I discuss the "deindustrialization" of sexuality.

Deindustrialization and sex lifestyle

The sex blogosphere propagates that sex should make one happy, explorative, and satisfied, and a journey of finding oneself. And all this is possible when one tries out customized products and services. This process is called "agential industrialization." I cite examples of sex toys customized for women. It is still prejudiced to buy sex toys, especially for women. However, it is easier for netizens to buy sex toys from e-commerce websites as the

consumer's identity remains anonymous. Here I want to discuss sex toys that are used for self-pleasure specifically. Masturbation is not an "acceptable" sexual practice in India. In *Kamasutra*, it is written that sex in the "wrong" kind of vagina or something other than the vagina is not true "kama" (pleasure). For erotic pleasure, two genitals should come in contact. And masturbation does not arouse true erotic pleasure (Vtsyayana 2002). In Hindu cultural psychology, sexual practices that do not conform to the genital sex approach are considered low and impure. However, self-pleasure is now understood as a lifestyle choice by a large number of Indian netizens. Via social networking sites, netizens are exposed to alternative sex cultures from across the globe. Sexual practices such as masturbation are now seen as a possible alternative to genital sex. Masturbation or self-pleasure is now understood beyond perversion (at least for the netizens). The idea of self-pleasure is now discussed openly. The sex blogosphere also establishes a strong connection between self-narrative and self-pleasure. Consider the following examples.

The tagline of women's sex toys on an online website called *Condombazar* is: "Find your perfect lover." The lover in question is not a human partner. Non-genital sex is normalized through such claims. The brand strongly promotes vibrators for women. The brand's message is that vibrators are customized to provide pleasure, just as each woman prefers. They needn't depend on anyone else for pleasure. Exploring sexuality and self-pleasure is a form of self-love. That is the alternative sex culture that emerges here.

I quote a few lines from the blog, "Vibrators for Indian women – Fact check" posted on *Condombazar* to further my point. It says, "Vibrators allow women to experience a full range of sexual sensations that they never thought about reality in life. It allows them to experience intense stimulation which may not be possible for them under normal circumstances." This blog talks to women about customized pleasure. Blogs like this break cultural stereotypes of sex. I claim that sex blogosphere generates lifestyle pedagogies. But it goes without saying that such a pedagogy is also consumerist to some extent. It is indeed a positive approach to perceiving sex and pleasure beyond tradition. But in reality, the sex blogosphere produces a fantasy. The fantasy of romance, sex, and intimacy. It feeds the sex industry by creating the need in the netizens' psyche to achieve this fantasy. Personalized products are constantly pushed into the market to satiate "individual" sexual fantasies. It is liberating for women to be reassured through the sex blogosphere that

they do not have to depend on a partner for sexual pleasure necessarily. It is empowering for women in a country where they are trained to treat sex as a man's prerogative. It is apparent from the example of *Condombazar* that the blogosphere focuses on women's experience of sex. It is a rare topic of discussion in traditional and formal institutions of sex pedagogy. Women in traditional Indian culture are seen only as catalysts for maximizing sexual pleasure for their male partners. On the contrary, the vibrator in question promises pleasure customized only for women. Therefore, the blogosphere adds a dynamic to the angle of women's sexuality in India.

Globalization and cosmopolitan sex culture

The essence of globalization is the interconnectivity between cultures, people, and nations. In the twenty-first century, this interconnectivity is brought by technology, namely the internet. Cosmopolitanism is the result of an interconnected global culture. The netizens' idea of a cosmopolitan society and global citizenship is inculcated via social networking sites such as blogs. Cosmopolitanism is a universalist way of thinking about culture, race, sex, etc. It is about sharing cultures and adopting from other cultures without restrictions and prejudice (Robert Fine, 2007). In these terms, the Indian blogosphere is a cosmopolitan space that propagates an inclusive idea of sex. Enjoying sex as leisure is more important than just engaging in sex. Engaging in sex is not enough in the cosmopolitan DIY lifestyle that the blogosphere propagates. Exploring different sexuality is a way of living a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

I consider the example of the following blog post from the women's lifestyle magazine *Cosmopolitan India*. The blog's title is "How to surprise a man with sex; guys reveal the hottest ways their GFs have initiated sex." The title is self-explanatory. The blog encourages women to adopt a more proactive role in sexual encounters. In *Kamasutra*, women are often treated as passive objects of pleasure. Moreover, the script says that women should not show emotional excitement during sex. They can only accept the advances of their male partner (Vatsyayana, 2002). Such preaching is the opposite of what the blog says about women's sexuality. The knowledge circulated through this blog ("How to surprise a man with sex, guys reveal the hottest ways their GFs have initiated sex") is also different from the teachings on "looking desirable." It is different because the emphasis is not on the shapes

of women and the sizes of male genitals. It is important to emphasize here that *Cosmopolitan* is a woman's magazine. Women's sexual curiosity is introduced as the norm of their sexuality in the present times. This concept is an alternative to the notions of ideal Indian womanhood. It celebrates a lifestyle where women express their sexual desires more freely.

Interestingly, the blog is written from the perspective of men. The message that it conveys is that men find it attractive when women make the first approach. In this blog, a couple of men write about their experiences when women take the initiative in sex. I refer to these anecdotes to analyze the non-traditional teachings emerging on women's sexuality from the blogosphere. Take one anecdote for example, "She drove about 40 minutes to see me, came into my room, and started undressing. She was wearing incredibly sexy lingerie. She was talking about her day like it was totally normal while I stared, then she climbed on top of me" ("How to surprise a man with sex, guys reveal the hottest ways their GFs have initiated sex"). In a way, women's sexuality comes to the forefront in such a lifestyle. This blog is evidence of cosmopolitan sexual practices. These practices include discussing women's proactive role in initiating sex without judgment. This particular blog presents women's active role as an alternative sexual choice. Women playing participatory roles in sex is part of "sexing up the home" (Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith, 2013). I take another example to explain my point further. The lifestyle magazine *New Woman* posted a blog titled, "Five sex positions that will help women take charge." It says,

While most men like to be dominating in bed, they will almost unanimously agree that once in a while being ruled over can be heavenly... So why not, recharge his energy for later and give him an indulgent carnal bonanza to remember!

The teachings that emerge from this blog are about women's sexual desire. I refer to *Kamasutra* once again here. *Kamasutra* says that when women are on top, it causes embryonic damage. Children born from such sexual encounters show reversed gender behavior (Vatsyayana, 2002). Contrary to such a belief, the blog mentioned here teaches women to take charge. It is different from the shy, coy, and sexually naïve image of women manufactured through cultural training. The "naïve woman" image is popularized as sexual appeal. The blogosphere presents women with an alternative under-

standing of sexuality. It is usual for women to be knowledgeable about sex. Being proactive or knowledgeable about sex does not make them promiscuous women. The netizens are now better informed about these nuances of sexuality. However, this teaching can be slightly more refined. Sex need not be a man-on-woman or woman-on-man act. Sexual pleasure is more about being in touch with one's sexuality and fulfilling their desires. At the same time, consider the partner's feelings and desires. I find that an unhealthy culture of pressuring women to become initiators is also developing as a byproduct of the sex blogosphere. Being sexually active women is the new standard of desirability. The blogosphere sometimes implies that it is essential for women to take the initiative roles. The blog I refer to does not say that women can derive more pleasure by becoming active agents in sexual encounters. Women's sexuality is not just for men's pleasure. Women can take charge of their sexuality for their own sake. The blogosphere somewhere misses out on such nuances regarding women's sexuality. Having said that, I firmly believe that the sex blogosphere is an essential medium because it popularizes alternative sex cultures that are women-centric, wholesome, and non-homogenous.

Conclusion

Blogosphere reshapes the idea of women's sexuality among netizens. Talking about sex in the realm of the blogosphere is not as stigmatized. It can be said that the blogosphere normalizes talking about sex in virtual spaces and outside. The Indian sex blogosphere is slowly moving towards creating alternative sex cultures. This sex culture includes women's fuller participation in sex. It is much unlike the teachings on sex propagated by mainstream media or formal sex pedagogies. This change in Indian cultural ethos is only possible through the internet and social networking sites. All these factors lead to conclude that the blogosphere is a legitimate source of informal sex pedagogy for netizens, especially women.

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