

FACTS

against

MYTHS



VIKAS ADHYAYAN KENDRA

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INFORMATION BULLETIN

Myths on Sexual Minorities – I

– Sanjukta Ghosh

“Studying the history of [a] term challenges its power.”

– Jonathan Ned Katz

COMMENT

The film “Fire” directed by Deepa Mehta ignited a huge storm of protests by different constituencies all over India. Issues at stake were the freedom of expression, censorship and democracy, artistic liberties and rights, and the effect of mass media images.

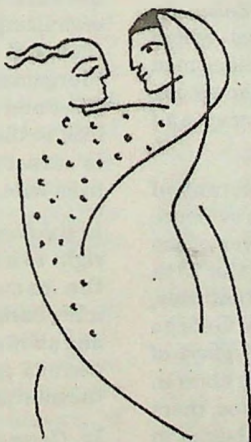
But underlying these surface fights were fundamental questions such as: what constitutes acceptable sexual behavior, whether or not homosexuality is a western import or a pathology and whether or not homosexuality is consonant with what are deemed “Indian” values, beliefs and attitudes. In fact, the film brought to the fore an ideological war, one aimed at defining “Indianness,” acceptable sexuality and hegemonic femininity. The tenor of the rhetoric of the nation’s self-appointed morality police indicated that this was an exclusionary war, one aimed at disenfranchising

and marginalising a section of the population — the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities.

Though the gay rights movement (if it can be called such) in India is a nascent one, any discussion of it must be situated historically within pre-Vedic, Vedic, Mughal, colonial and post-colonial periods. Furthermore, it cannot be divorced from a discussion on sexuality, marriage, women’s issues, public-health

concerns and human rights. Although human sexuality has not been part of a comfortably accepted public discourse in modern India, this has not always been the case. Indeed, the history of marginalisation and, indeed, criminalization of homosexuality is fraught with foreign influences. Arguably, it is the coming of Islam that brought major changes in the sexual values of India, and the British occupation intensified the Puritanism.

Practices that are today termed “homosexual sexual behavior” have always existed in different forms and



Source : Sanga Mitra

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in different cultures (Heyl 1989, Katz 1996, Foucault 1978, Thadani 1996, Mukherjee in Shah 1998). And at different times homosexual sexual behavior has been approved of, tolerated, and banned. By examining the history of what has been permitted as socially acceptable and unacceptable sexuality, one can begin to uncover the way culture, tradition, values and morals have been and continue to be used as tools of oppression and discrimination.

A Cross-Cultural Perspective

It is almost a cliché to say that human sexuality is complex. And, our attempts at understanding and classifying it have been simplistic at best and problematic at worst. Though environmental and psychosocial influences play important roles in shaping our sexuality, homosexual sexual behavior seems to be, to some extent, innate in all races and cultures. However, the opportunities for expressing this behavior or even a desire are clearly regulated by cultural boundaries. The ancient *Middle East* made a special place for homosexuality in its myths and rites. The biblical book of Leviticus (18:22-27) banned homosexuality specifically because the Canaanite population had been practicing those rites (Boswell 2000).

In *Melanesian* societies, anthropologists have noted that it is homosexual activities such as fellatio between older men and young boys that initiate the tribe's male youngsters into adulthood. Drinking the semen of older men becomes a way of imbibing the strength and wisdom of the elders (Herdt 1997). A similar practice is seen among the Azandes of Zaire (the present Democratic Republic of Congo) where adolescents serve as "boy wives" to older men (Evans-Pritchard 1978) and in Lesotho among women of the Basotho tribe (Murray and Roskam 1998).

Medieval *Russia* too was very tolerant of homosexuality (Moss 1999). There is evidence of homosexual love in some of the lives of the saints from Kievan Rus dating to the 11th century. Later in the 16th and 17th centuries, foreign travel writers, such as George Turberville, wrote about the open displays of homosexuality among people of every class in Muscovite Russia. In Islamic culture too, there are several examples of homosexual themes in literature and art from the homoerotic poems of 13th century Persian poet Sadi Gulistan to

the sexually explicit poems of Al-Andulus in Muslim Spain, to the sexual comedy of *The Arabian Nights*, and the ecstatic loving of Sufi mystics (Halsall 1997).

Finally, within Judeo-Christian culture, homosexuality was not perceived as sinful and socially unacceptable until circa 1700. According to Boswell, examples of this in history are: age-dissonant sexual relations between older men who would take a conventionally "male" role in a sexual relationship with a younger male; and gender-dissonant relationships where "biological" males lived as "non-males" throughout their lives.

In other words norms regarding sexuality are certainly culture-specific, time-bound and tied to religious laws. In every culture and society throughout history, there are people who attempt every anatomically possible form of sexual stimulation and gratification. The difference in patterns of sexual expression among societies derives from their history, culture, present circumstances and power relations. These factors also determine whether their actual patterns of sexual behavior are open or hidden.

Sexual Minority Rights

On the question of the rights of sexual minorities, in India there are several groups such as TARSHI and Stree Sangam in Delhi or CEHAT at Andheri, Mumbai spearheading the campaign for homosexual rights. Historically, however, much of the impetus for such activism has come from organizations based in Europe and North America. This is so because of similarities in objectives, organizing and institutional impediments. And though it took many decades for homosexuals to organize themselves as a political force in the West and make some legislative gains, we can look to these nations to see the rights granted to sexual minorities. (The factoids are taken from wire service and newspaper reports).

In the *Netherlands*, same-sex couples have the right to a legal marriage. They are entitled to the same pension, social security, and inheritance rights as all other married couples, and allowed to adopt children. The country also permits gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military;

In *Canada*, the British Columbia Human Rights Code prohibits discrimination against the LGBT community in employment, housing, or

a service or facility. It also protects individuals from hate publications aimed at sexual orientation;

In *New Zealand*, it is unlawful to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their sexual orientation. This applies in the areas of employment, access to public places, provision of goods and services, accommodation and educational establishments. And though there is still a ban on lesbian and gay marriage, federal judges have said the country's 1955 Marriage Law discriminates against same-sex couples and new legislation is necessary to correct the discrimination. The country also has laws guarding sexual privacy;

In *Norway*, same-sex marriage is legal. The country also has wide-ranging laws banning discrimination against gays and lesbians;

In the *United States*, while the federal government does not recognize same-sex marriages, in several states like Hawaii and New Jersey, judges have issued same-sex couple marriage licenses. Some states also give domestic partner benefits to same-sex couples and the federal Anti Hate Crimes Bill now covers any form of anti-homosexual harassment.

It is certainly not the case that the North has led the way in making guaranteeing fundamental freedoms to its sexual minority community. In fact certain key constitutional protections were first enacted in the South countries. For example: In 1996, South Africa became the first country to add a constitutional clause banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The protection on the basis of sexual orientation is built right into the country's Bill of Rights. In fact, it is the only country that constitutionally recognizes "that people's sexual nature is fundamental to their humanity," as phrased by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Furthermore, homosexual sex was legalized in 1998 and several insurance companies have recently changed their policies to allow for coverage of same-sex domestic partners.

To conclude, anti-homosexual discrimination, violence and social cleansing does not impact only lesbians, gays. *It affects all of us*. First, there is the direct cost to the public purse incurred through the enforcement of discriminatory laws. Second, is the cost to employers because of reduced productivity or

loss of individual workers, and the negative impact on the efficiency of companies as a whole through discrimination and harassment in the workplace. Third, there is also the cost linked to physical attacks on individuals (such as hospital treatment and absence from work) or on lesbian/gay businesses (such as loss of employment and income to the local economy).

Issues of concern to lesbians and gay men have to be on the agenda of all people and organizations concerned with the development of pluralist and democratic societies, in which all human rights are truly for all human beings. Endeavors and efforts to achieve equality for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people, and the respect of their human rights, as necessarily being part of a broader and more comprehensive struggle for, and commitment to, human rights and to equality.

MYTH: *Lesbianism is a Western phenomenon and films like Fire, made by NRIs, simply pollute Indian culture.*

FACT: There are several false assumptions embedded in this simple assertion — that lesbianism did not and does not exist in India, that women's sexuality can be manipulated through exposure to popular culture and that Indian culture is something authentic and self-contained.

Lesbianism and male homosexuality have been prevalent in all cultures and at all times. It was certainly present in ancient Greece since the term 'lesbianism' derives from the legend of Sappho on the isle of *Lesbos* where female-female sexual bonding was the norm. It was also present in ancient India as several works of art, literature and history show. In fact, as Thadani has shown in *Sakhiani*, to date the most comprehensive study on lesbian histories in India, lesbian comogonies in particular and gynefocal theologies and traditions existed for centuries in India in the pre-Vedic and Vedic periods and then reinterpreted during the *Shaktic* period (1996). It is only in the post-*Shaktic* period that these traditions were systematically destroyed and in their place heterosexuality, consortship and/or masculinized ideologies and images were constructed. Thadani gives several examples of inter-feminine relations in the text of the *Rg Ved*. While she cautions us against reducing all such bonding to a limited sexual level, what becomes evident is that lesbianism was certainly one important part of this bonding. Other

evidence of lesbianism are temples such as *Tara Tarini* where the original iconography of the lesbian twin goddesses in embrace have been replaced by a heterosexual image or and the erotic sculptures in temples at Konarak (Thadani 1996).

Further, the 5th century astrologer and Ayurvedic physician, *Varahmihir*, referred to lesbianism in his book *Brihat-Jatak*. He wrote, "if in an individual's horoscope, Venus and *Rahu* are aspected by each other or are in each other's '*navmansh*' (horoscope), then she will be afflicted with the person of the same sex acting as the opposite sex."

Finally, the *Kama Sutra* also contains an entire chapter, '*Auparishtaka*', on homosexual sex with references to lesbian activity observed in the *anthapura* (harem).

It is true that the *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti* make lesbian sexuality illegal and the *Ramayan* of *Valmiki* and the *Mahabharat* see it as degenerative behavior (Kumar 1996). Even if we accept these edicts, what these literary texts do show is the existence of lesbianism in India from time immemorial. More contemporary examples of lesbian existence are the recurrent female-female sex as a recurrent motif in Indian folk lore and the lesbo-erotics of "ladies sangeet" (Mehra and Wadhwa 1998). Some Indian figures from history that happen to be gay include Firaq Gorakhpuri and Amrita Shergill.

Lesbianism is also found in *Tantric* Hinduism, established as a religion in 800 AD when the people rebelled against the stratified upper caste priesthood that controlled religious worship. The central theme of the new spirituality was direct spiritual experience through ecstatic sexual practice, meditation and the use of sacraments. In *Tantric* beliefs, erotic love between women is a celebration of and an initiation into the female creative spirit (Coomaraswamy 1943). Because the form of woman power is highly valued woman loving woman can be the source of great wisdom in *Tantric* Hinduism. In fact, it is lesbian sexual love that has the potential to awaken and reunite individuals with the Divine. In other words, lesbian love is sacred and transformational.

Thus, we can see that far from being a "foreign" phenomenon, "a Western import", lesbianism is particularly Indian, having been celebrated and immortalized in different forms of Hinduism

in our earliest scriptures and sculptures. It was vilified only later. Today, in particular, there is no public space for free discussion of sexuality, leave alone women's sexuality. And consequently women's desires, needs and sexual relationships get hidden and become invisible. Lesbianism, more than male homosexuality, is seen as wrong precisely because this kind of female desire threatens Indian men and the heteropatriarchal social order. Labelling it a "foreign phenomenon" then simply becomes an act of protection of Indian women and their minds by their well-meaning menfolk.

There is a major fallacy underlying the myth that films like *Fire* promote lesbianism. It assumes that sexuality is something that can be taught or instigated. While sexuality has both a social and a biological component, it cannot be manipulated so easily through exposure to a single film or even a whole host of films. Curiously enough films like *Fire* are dangerous. But they are dangerous because they promote the idea that lesbian desires and relationships are outgrowths of heterosexuality gone bad; that all one need is a good encounter of heterosexual sex to be cured!! Scientists, psychologists, anthropologists and social scientists all agree that lesbianism has nothing to do with husbands who neglect, torture or abuse their wives. This entrenched fallacy not only promotes a rigid heterosexual-patriarchal order, but also does a disservice to both lesbians and heterosexual wives who ritualistically face emotional and mental sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands.

MYTH: *Sexual bonding is not a right and homosexuals are simply asking for special privileges.*

FACT: Marriage and family have a central place in Indian society.

However, homosexuals are denied this most fundamental of rights. This has two consequences. First, because there is no legal recognition of homosexual couples, homosexuality becomes a way for society to deny individuals benefits like pensions and life insurance of their partners, safe housing and access to medical treatments and public facilities.

Under personal family laws, homosexual individuals cannot inherit the assets of their partners even if they have been in a long-

In February 1988, two women police constables of the M.P. Special Armed Force, Leela Srivastava and Urmilla Namdeo got married. Their "marriage," however, was shortlived. They were fired from service on grounds of "conduct unbecoming of public servants";

- * Few years ago two women, Vinoda and Rekha, from the village of Patri and Dadgaon in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra, on approaching the registrar of marriages of the district were not only discouraged but forced to abandon even the thought of living together;
- * In May 1988, Asaruna and Sudha, employees of a Panchayat school in Vadadhali village of Naswadi taluka, Gujarat, signed a statement in the district court to enter into a "friendship pact," Maitri Karar;
- * On July 9, 1993, Neeru, employed at a TV repair shop in Faridabad and Meenu (who supported her widowed mother and younger siblings by singing in jagarans) got married in the local temple;
- * In June 1995, childhood friends, Suman, a second-year bachelor's student at Delhi's Jesus and Mary College, and Mamta, a student at the Delhi Polytechnic Institute, eloped when their families tried to discourage the two from any such liaison and separate them;
- * In 1990, Tarulata underwent a sex-change so as to marry her girlfriend, Lila Chavda. The latter's father, Muljibhai Chavda, went to the Gujarat High Court, to have the marriage annulled. The petition contended that "Tarunkumar (Tarulata) has 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".
- * In late 1995 Sandhya Times reported the cases of Manisha marrying Madhu by "putting blood on her head" and of two twenty-two-year-old women from, Mansiha Kaushal and Madhu Arora, becoming lifelong "companions." The report said Madhu's parents tried to get her married to a man, but the lovers fled to another city. The people who had rented them their housing subsequently objected to their relationship, and the couple was eventually arrested by the police.

standing relationship. Even if there is a will, if it is challenged by any other possible beneficiary, all claims of the partner will be rejected in court or struck down on moral grounds. Seeking palimony, alimony or maintenance out of homosexual relationships becomes moot since the court does not recognize such unions.

Legally, medical facilities and practitioners cannot refuse treatment to a person on the grounds of his or her being a homosexual, public spaces and services, like restaurants and trains, too are legally required to serve all populations. Yet, for a long time, the Indian Railways had banned people with AIDS from its trains and homosexuals are still barred from entering some clubs or restaurants. The Railways, lifted its ban only in 1995 after

intensive media coverage. In the armed forces and in the police services, homosexuals can be refused recruitment under its rules of conduct. (cf. Box above for illustration of such cases)

These cases make it quite obvious that there is little the homosexual community can do to fight this widespread and serious discrimination. Far from being sympathetic to their cause the courts, in fact, treat homosexuality as a crime. Under the Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, formulated by the British Parliament for India in 19th century, homosexuality — even among consenting adults — is punishable by up to 10 years imprisonment. It follows that homosexuals are not permitted to organize, socialize publicly or discuss their situation in a public space as this would be tantamount to abatement of the offense under existing laws.

As a consequence of all this, homosexuals are denied the Fundamental Rights of Free Speech, The Right To Privacy (Article 21 of the Constitution) and Right To Free Assembly — guaranteed to all other citizens.

The second consequence of the centrality of marriage and family in the Indian social formation is that homosexuality is seen as an attempt to disrupt tradition and religion, in favor of modernity and individualism. In our male-defined society, men are overvalued and given a special status simply because of their gender. Depending upon their caste and social status they can and often *do* command a considerable dowry in marriage. Public knowledge of a man's homosexuality would prevent him from being married and fetching a good dowry, thereby leaving him and his family economically poorer. Female homosexuals are dealt with more severely than men. Since women are considered the property of men, expressing and gratifying sexual desires independent of men is not tolerated at all for this would be tantamount to giving up control of women's sexuality. As a result of this, many homosexual women and men end up being married, sublimating their natural desires, and battling acute depression.

All these cases show that in India the ideology of normal sexuality equates it with procreation. This has its roots in the "gender codes" grounded in the early Brahmanic and caste ideology. Thus, abnormal sexuality gets equated with abnormal gender which, in turn, gets equated with death. The internalization of this ideology is clearly manifested in the court's attitude towards Turalata/Tarunkumar. Gender crossover was not enough to establish "malehood" and non-reproductive sexuality constituted abnormality. Thus the only legitimate, sanctioned and approved sexuality was heterosexual in nature and procreative in purpose. However, by these standards, sexual activity of the vast majority of people, whether heterosexual or homosexual, would be illicit or illegal!

In conclusion, far from it being a matter of asking for special privileges, what the lesbian, gay transgendered and bisexual communities of India are demanding are Fundamental Rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution and international covenants. They are seeking enforcement of: Article 14 of the Indian

Constitution which forbids discrimination against persons on the basis of sex and therefore sexual orientation.

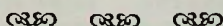
Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that states: "No person should be discriminated against on the basis of race, sex, religion, cast, color, or any other status."

Articles 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which guarantees every citizen the right to privacy, and thus every individual's right to choose and live even in same-gender relationships.

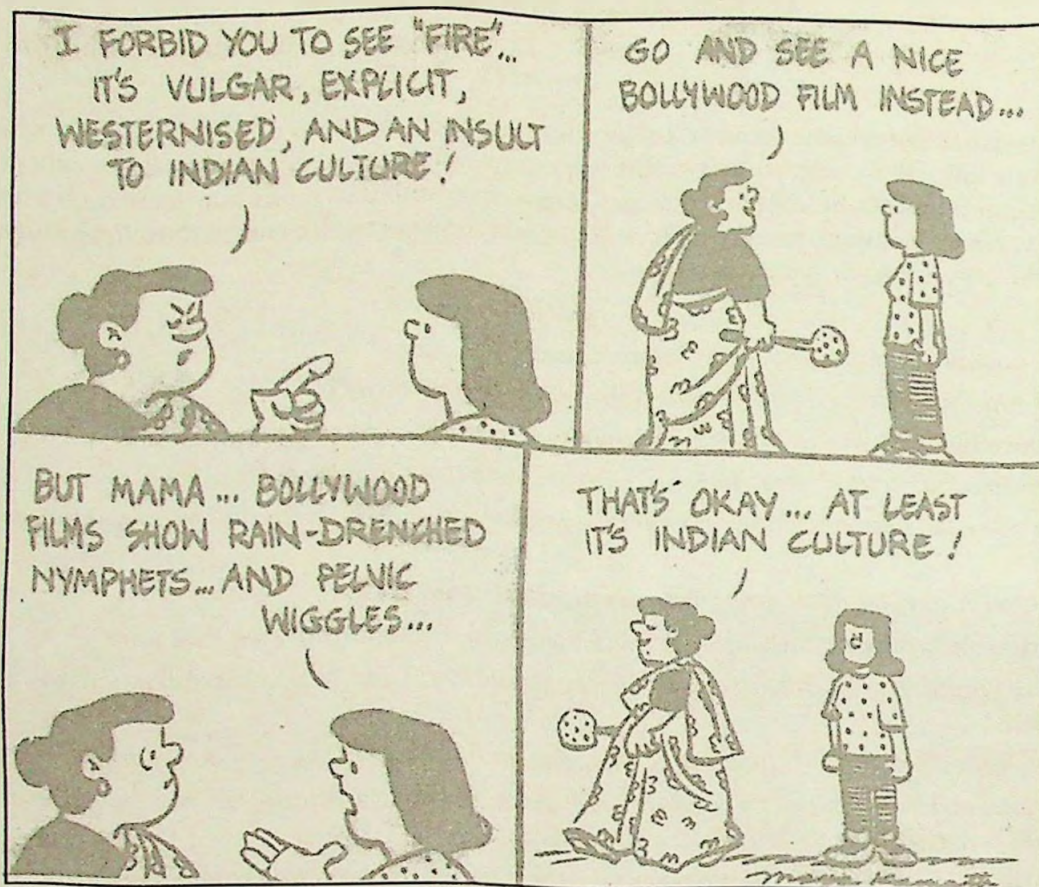
MYTH: Lesbians are highly masculine in their appearance. Moreover, they are promiscuous and unstable.

FACT: This myth is based on the concept that certain forms of dressing and certain ways of walking and talking are gendered "female" "male." Clothing is an artificial accessory that has taken on a gendered quality only through repeated usage. Moreover, it has a strict relation to history. Just a few years ago adult Indian women were discouraged or forcibly forbidden from wearing pants or shorts. A desire to wear pants itself was seen as "abnormal." However, it is pervasive today. Clothing, and the freedoms it has offered in physical movement, has often led to a different stride in women. This too has been deemed "masculine" but has historical and cultural specificity. Perhaps a tiny percentage of lesbians do have an appearance deemed "masculine," but by and large it is a stereotype. Interestingly, evidence shows that homosexual relationships tend to ape the heterosexual model of a dominant and a subservient partner. Thus, one partner of same-gender relationship may well imitate superficial actions of the opposite sex, and therefore exhibit a "masculine" persona.

The related myth about promiscuity is linked to the hetero-patriarchal institution of marriage. Since marriage is not available for lesbian women or gay men, they are more free to change partners if they so desire. However, there is no proof to show that lesbians and gay men are any more or less promiscuous than other people. In fact, there are several anecdotes suggesting that lesbians and gay men have stronger bonds as relationships survive a long time despite severe social ostracism and financial difficulties.



Courtesy: Asian Age, 9/12/98, Mumbai



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1. Sangini

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(Tuesdays, 6 to 8 p.m.)

2. Sakhi

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3. Stree Sangam,

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4. Bombay Dost

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5. Counsel Club

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6. Good As You

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Hetrosexual Questionnaire

By Martin Rochlim, Ph.D

This Heterosexual Questionnaire reverses the questions that are very often asked of gays and lesbians by straight people. By having to answer this type of question, the heterosexual person will get some intellectual and emotional insight in to how oppressive and discriminatory a 'Straight' frame of reference can be to lesbians and gays. (Rochlin is a psychologist who realized that *those that needed to be treated were straight people, not gays.*)

1. What do you think caused your heterosexuality?
2. When and how did you first decide you were a heterosexual?
3. Is it possible that your heterosexuality is just a phase you may grow out of?
4. Is it a possibility that your heterosexuality stems from a neurotic fear?
5. If you've never slept with a person of the same sex, is it possible that all you need is a good gay lover?
6. To whom have you disclosed your heterosexual tendencies?
7. Why do you heterosexuals feel compelled to seduce others into your lifestyle?
8. Why do you insist on flaunting your heterosexuality? Can't you just be what you are and keep it quiet?
9. Would you want your children to be heterosexual, knowing the problems they'd face?
10. A disproportionate majority of child molesters are heterosexuals. Do you consider it safe to expose your children to heterosexual teachers?
11. Even with all the societal support marriage receives, the divorce rate is spiraling. Why are there so few stable relationships among heterosexuals?
12. Why do heterosexuals place so much emphasis on sex?
13. Considering the menace of overpopulation, how could the human race survive if everyone were heterosexual?
14. Could you trust a heterosexual therapist to be objective? Don't you fear that the therapist might be inclined to influence you in the direction of his or her own leanings?
15. How can you become a whole person if you limit yourself to compulsive, exclusive, heterosexuality and fail to develop your natural, healthy homosexual potential?
16. There seem to be very few happy heterosexuals. Techniques have been developed that might enable you to change if you really want to. Have you considered trying aversion therapy?

From: 'Lesbian & Gay Issues: A Resource Manual for Social Workers,' Natalie J. Woodman, Travis L. Peterson and Hilda Hildalgo, editors, NASW, 1984.

Facts Against Myths is a monthly bulletin of factual information on a number of development myths and fallacies, etc, including information against alien development models, paradigms and false concepts on caste, creed and gender.



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