UNIT 1  SEXUALITY AND GENDER

Contents

1.1 Introduction
1.2 The Role of Biology
1.3 The Role of Society, Language, Power
   1.3.1 Feminism, Sexuality and Gender
   1.3.2 Freud: The Psychoanalytical Conceptions of Gender and Sexuality
   1.3.3 Foucault: The Discursive Production of Sexuality
   1.3.4 Butler: A Foucauldian Interpretation of Freud
1.4 Culture and Sexuality
   1.4.1 Gender Identities, Sexual Identities and Culture
   1.4.2 Male and Female Sexuality and Culture
   1.4.3 Kinship and Sexuality
1.5 History of Sexuality in India: Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBT-Q) Politics
1.6 Summary

References
Suggested Reading
Sample Questions

Learning Objectives

After going through the module, a student should:

- understand and critique biologically determinist frameworks of understanding sex, gender and sexuality;
- be familiar with social constructionist frameworks for understanding sex, gender and sexuality;
- understand anthropological work in this paradigm demonstrating how different cultures articulate the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality in different ways; and
- be familiar with the Indian context of sexual politics.

1.1  INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is a broad area of study related to an individual’s sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation. Categorising ourselves in terms of being a ‘man’ or ‘woman’ is a fundamental way in which we understand ourselves and one another. Normatively, these social categories of ‘gender’ map onto the biological realities of possessing male or female secondary sexual characteristics – what is called the ‘sex’ of a person.

Thus a range of psychological traits and behaviours such as aggression, verbal ability, assertiveness, passivity, etc., as also who one desires – an aspect of sexuality- are associated with male and female. Across cultures, the relationship
Cross Cultural Perspectives

between sex, gender and sexuality tends to be narrowly defined. Thus, a person with a vagina is a woman with characteristic ways of experiencing herself and the world and with characteristic patterns of desire: “normally”, she would desire a man.

It is important to make a distinction between two types of questions in relation to sex and gender. First is the question of the reality of gender, or in other words, do sex differences link to differences in social life so that there are two types of beings called men and women? ‘Sex differences’ research in psychology at the turn of the 20th century studied an enormous range of behaviours and characteristics across the sexes using a range of scales, inventories and questionnaires. A review and analysis of this massive and uncoordinated body of research by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) concluded that there was small but consistent differences between the sexes in just four areas: verbal ability (girls showed higher), visual-spatial ability (boys are superior), mathematical ability (boys were superior) and aggressiveness (boys are more aggressive). They argued that there is a tendency to report findings of difference and under-report findings of similarities so that men and women may be more similar than different with more differences within the population of men or women.

Second, conceding that there are observed differences between the sexes on some traits and characteristics, to what do we owe these differences? Sometimes the existence of real differences between men and women is taken to mean that these are inevitable and rooted in biology (genes, hormones, physical characteristics). Thus, from within this framework homosexuality can be seen as a genetic aberration or men can be thought as naturally more sexually aggressive than women. However, these differences might also stem from environmental or social influences or from our tendency to make sense of our experiences in a world which offers us certain ways of understanding them (the role of language). These two explanations are often competing and form the two poles of what is known as the nature-nurture debate.

Today, claims that our psychology is either completely determined by culture or biology is rare and explanations suggest that biology and environment interact in complex ways to produce the social phenomena we experience as gender or sexuality. Thus while biological givens cannot be denied altogether, it is also the case that the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality is reinforced and reproduced by a range of social institutions including religion, the state, education and the family.

Some of the evidence from sex-difference research is sometimes borne out in our social life. Thus, that males are more aggressive seems validated by the fact that domestic violence, rape and other violent crimes are predominantly committed by men. However, explanations or accounts of these differences are not merely academic but also political because biologically determinist explanations can justify social disadvantage deriving from these differences, inevitable as they are. Biological determinist explanations are also often the basis on which non-normative sexualities and gender identities are marginalised (as aberrant or abnormal). On the other hand understanding the social construction of these paves the way to the reorganisation of the world that is respectful of difference.
This module first introduces the concepts of sex, sexuality and gender and examines closely some problems with biological determinism before presenting frameworks of understanding that tend towards the ‘social’ as deriving from such diverse fields as feminism, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. Building on these social-constructionist frameworks, the module next specifically reviews research on sexuality as conducted within an anthropological framework. Finally, the module considers some concepts useful for engagement with the praxis of sexuality and gender – policy and politics as they relate to gender and sexuality.

1.2 THE ROLE OF BIOLOGY

Although many accept an interaction between biology and society to produce sexed and gendered individuals, there is a common sense assumption that biological factors provide a powerful, irrefutable push in certain directions while environmental factors merely provide a moderating effect. Also, not only is biology a more powerful force than society, there is also a tendency to value the natural over the cultural – especially in contemporary Western society. Thus for instance, stating that homosexuality is unnatural is also often to say that it is unacceptable. Here biology or nature is recruited in the aid of ideology that advantages some and disadvantages others. Most human activity such as wearing clothes, writing a book or pursuing education cannot be categorised as ‘natural’ activities but still do not come under moral censure.

Biologically-determinist theories of sex and sexuality have drawn heavily on science, from physiology in the 19th century to neurobiology and genetics in the 20th and 21st centuries. These explanations have focused upon hormonal, genetic or evolutionary factors. Thus, aggression is linked to the male reproductive hormone testosterone. However, evidence of this link has primarily come from animal studies with consequent problems of generalising to humans and where human subjects have been used, the evidence is contradictory. A genetic foundation has been attributed to both aggression and homosexuality though in both cases research has failed to identify a gene in men that make them aggressive or a ‘homosexual gene’.

More compelling are explanations that suggest that certain behaviours (aggression and promiscuity in males; heterosexuality) are genetically reinforced through natural selection because they aid in the survival of the species. Thus the reproductive function of females – pregnancy and child-care would recommend that they remain confined to the home to avoid endangering their young. With this division of labour, aggressive men who can defend themselves better when hunting are more likely to pass on their genes to their children while nurturant mothers are more likely to pass on their genes to their children who have higher chances of survival because of the nurturance they receive from the mother. In the context of sexuality, women are less promiscuous than men because the investment in pregnancy and the responsibility for the care of the child would recommend that she chooses a man who is most likely to support her in the upbringing of the child. On the other hand, a man who is free of the burden of pregnancy and child-care would best ensure the passing on of his genes by impregnating as many females as possible.

Evolutionary theory applied to sexuality would understand the biological differences between the sexes and the inevitable attraction between them as
genetically programmed to ensure that the human race and society flourishes. Here, a key idea is that men and women have sex in order to reproduce and this plays a functional role in human evolution. A consequence of such reasoning is that homosexuality thereby becomes “unnatural” and an aberration. However a problem with this reasoning is as Jeffrey Weeks (2003) points out, most heterosexual human sexual activity is not undertaken for the purpose of reproduction. For example, masturbation, cross-dressing or sexual fetishes practiced between heterosexual couples do not require intercourse between bodies. Thus heterosexual activity is not only about a propagation of the species or one’s gene pool.

1.3 THE ROLE OF SOCIETY, LANGUAGE, POWER

The problem with biological bases of sexuality is that they tend to be reductionist – complex social and political dynamics are veiled-over to present a simplistic analysis that is based on biology. Biological explanations cannot account for why powerful institutions such as religion, laws, the police and military have to be employed to police, control and limit the expression of a sexuality committed to reproduction.

Various traditions in the social sciences have attempted to develop frameworks of understanding that acknowledge the role of social or cultural forces in shaping our sexual lives as also the role that power plays to advantage certain sections of society while marginalising others. Here we briefly examine feminist, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist understandings of sex, gender and sexuality.

1.3.1 Feminism, Sexuality and Gender

**Box**

**Feminism**: Feminism is committed to theorising bases of inequality (in opportunities, rights, privileges) between men and women and to a programme of social change for addressing it. Different views of why there is gender inequality gives rise to different forms of feminism with different recommendations for change (Burr, 1998).

**Psychoanalysis**: Theory of the human mind in which the self or the ego wrestles with the sexual drives of the unconscious on the one hand and the demands for restraint and denial arising from the super-ego on the other. Psychoanalysis emphasises the role of early childhood experiences in producing subjectivity (or the self) including gendered and sexed subjectivities.

**Poststructuralism**: Poststructuralism names a theory, or a group of theories, concerning the relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings. Poststructuralists affirm that consciousness is not the origin of the language we speak and the images we recognise, so much as the product of the meanings we learn and reproduce. Language here is not understood in terms of the words we speak but in terms of discourse: systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak.
Feminists see biological accounts of male sexuality and/or aggression as justifying coercive male sexuality such as rape, sexual harassment. Radical feminists go a step further to propose that sexuality and male aggression is the cornerstone of women’s oppression. Their central argument is that, heterosexuality is defined by male domination and female submission; when the most fundamental of human relations are defined in this manner, then it is little wonder that other contexts (such as work and the family) follow suit with men having unequal power and privilege in relation to women (Burr, 1998). Some radical feminists claim that gender is reinscribed each time a heterosexual act takes place such that through the act of male penetration of female bodies, where the person with the penis is the ‘giver’ (dominant) and the person with the vagina, the ‘receiver’ (submissive), gender is reproduced. Men and women are (re)produced in each instance of coercive male sexuality such as rape, sexual harassment, the wolf-whistle and pornography- where women are pitted as passive objects of male desire. These are not isolated examples of male dominance but reflect general male privilege and power that men as a class hold over women as a class.

1.3.2 Freud: The Psychoanalytic Conceptions of Gender and Sexuality

According to Sigmund Freud, children’s gender identity rests on their recognition that they have (in the case of boys) or don’t have (in the case of girls) a penis. For boys, the penis represents their entry ticket into the powerful world of men; both boys and girls are thought to believe that girl’s lack of penis is a result of castration for some wrong-doing and boys live in constant fear of this happening to them too. During the Oedipal phase, when he is 3 to 5 years old, boys’ increasing sexual awareness become directed to his mother. But the boy fears that his powerful but distant father will castrate him in retaliation and he deals with this anxiety by repressing his feelings for his mother and identifying with the father, taking on all that the father stands for – his voice of authority and the social norms and values he embodies. Little girls on the other hand, who are aware that their castrated status renders them second class citizens, inevitably see their mothers as also castrated and therefore second best. In her identification with the mother, the little girl therefore takes on the board a submissive attitude in relation to a man (heterosexuality). Moreover, since she has not had to resolve the Oedipus complex, as also not having identified with an authority figure, develops not the strength of character and moral rectitude that little boys develop. According to Freud, children start out as “polymorphously perverse” and may feel desire for either parent; in some of his postulations, he predicates the final identification to the same-sex parent to be dependent on the presence of innate dispositions of corresponding masculinity or femininity.

Freud’s theory of gender and sexual identity clearly valourises masculinity; later psychoanalytic formulations have built on Freud’s ideas while producing less misogynistic accounts. Freud’s views have been criticised on many grounds including the assumed superiority of the penis over the vagina, the implication that only father discipline in the home (and represent authority) as also for ignoring gender as a system of power relations in society and taking for granted male power in society.
1.3.3 Foucault: The Discursive Production of Sexuality

Michel Foucault, a poststructuralist theorist, provides a most vivid illustration of the ways in which the modern sexual subject is produced in networks of power operating through knowledge and discourse in the three volume *History of Sexuality* series (1976-84). Foucault’s theories of discourse hold that the individual subject is produced in and through specific discourses that circulate in any society at any given moment– in the media, through speech, through practices, through academic, legal papers and documents etc. E.g., subject categories such as ‘homosexual’ and or ‘criminal’ do not exist prior to their construction in language and discourse. People termed ‘homosexuals’ only know themselves as such and are called as such through the discourses of science and medicine that constructs bodies of knowledge about a subject named as ‘the homosexual’ or ‘the criminal’. Power operates through such knowledge as is spread through discourses (the power/knowledge axis) by producing such categories of identification or the subject.

A key idea that Foucault debunks is the idea of sexual repression during the 17th century and the subsequent liberation from repression in the 19th century as proposed by historians of sexuality. Instead, he argues that even in the age of supposed liberation, power operated in more insidious ways to produce specific kinds of sexual subjects. Foucault examines the ways in which sex has been “put into discourse” through medicine, the church, psychoanalysis, education programmes, demography and the criminal-justice system. All of these discourses on sexuality just produce different kinds of sexual objects through different technologies of power.

Foucault is critical of disciplines such as psychology and psychiatry that work on the principle that it is possible to liberate us by helping us to realise the deep truths that we have repressed. According to Foucault, psychiatry itself is the source of these fundamental truths. So for instance, by examining the medical and psychiatric discourses on sexuality during the “repressive” Victorian times and during the current era, Foucault demonstrates how these discourses actively produces particular “truths” about sexuality. Foucault talks about the paradox of freedom—“talking about ourselves as requiring freedom owing to fundamental constraints produces an ‘us’ that is fundamentally constrained” (Hepburn, 2003). For Foucault, there is no true hidden sexuality: the “repressed” sexual subject and the “liberated” sexual subject are products of discourse and forms of power and knowledge.

1.3.4 Butler: A Foucauldian Interpretation of Freud

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), poststructuralist feminist thinker Judith Butler propounds a theory of the relationship between language, the unconscious, sex and gender. A key idea in Butler’s theory is the idea of *performativity*. According to Butler, there is no essential woman who is the author of her gendered identity – mannersimms, thoughts, feelings, personality features that constitute what is called ‘feminine’. The gendered subject is not the *cause* of gendered acts but is in fact an *effect* of these performative acts. Butler says that if gender is what one *does* rather than *is*, then it should be possible to do gender in ways that that show the constructed nature of heterosexuality in ways that challenge vested interests to present them as natural or essential or non-constructed. In drag, the disjunction between the body of the performer and the
gender enacted is highlighted and this according to Butler draws attention the imitated nature of all gender identities.

Butler also does an interesting reinterpretation of Freud; she challenges the idea of innate dispositions of masculinity or femininity that Freud sometimes proposes as required for identification with same-sexed parent. Butler challenges Freud’s idea that dispositions lead to masculine or feminine identifications. Instead she says that it is these identifications that cause the dispositions (of femininity or masculinity). So according to her when a little girl desires her mother, it is not the incest taboo that operates but the homosexual taboo. This formulation requires that people identified as heterosexual desire the parent of the same sex. Why would this happen? Butler says that what is forbidden is what is desired—here she becomes Foucauldian. In other words, the law produces the desire that it subsequently prohibits. So the taboo against homosexuality produces this very desire for the same sex parent in a child. This being forbidden, the child has to relinquish the desired object and identify with the desired object. So girls identify with their mothers and boys with their fathers (Salih, 2002).

So what is she saying here? Whereas Freud suggested something innate about masculinity or femininity that makes one identify with a man or woman, Butler sees society’s prohibitory rule as producing a man or woman. Or in other words, Butler thinks all of gender identity (which includes desire for the opposite sex or heterosexuality) as being based on a prohibitory rule in society. The idea here is that heterosexuality is based on a prohibited homosexuality; heterosexuality requires homosexuality in order to define itself and maintain its stability (Salih, 2002).

### 1.4 CULTURE AND SEXUALITY

The manner in which we experience ourselves as gendered and sexual beings finds life within symbolic meaning-systems existing in different cultures. Research shows how cultural values systems inform such diverse sex (or sexuality) related things as gender-identities, the control of female sexuality and understandings of kinship and family.

#### 1.4.1 Gender Identities, Sexual Identities and Culture

The Western binary of heterosexual ‘men’ and ‘women’ as created by a strict definition of the relationship between sex and gender (including sexuality) is challenged by transgender people such as the Hijra in India or Tom and Dee in Thailand and the Fa’afafine in the Pacific.

*Hijras* are the ‘third-sex’, the ‘eunuch’ or the intersexed hermaphrodite in India (Reddy and Nanda 2009). Though the most visible alternative sex/gender, they are located within a larger spectrum of sexual and gender configurations in India which includes *the kothi, panthi and naran*. *Narans* are characterised by gendered “feminine” practices and the ability to bear children; in other words, all women are narans. *Kothis* are those men who “like to do women’s work” and are the receivers or the ‘bottoms’ in same-sex encounters with other men. *Panthis* are the givers or the ‘tops’ in sexual intercourse with other men and distance themselves from the “female” practices typically embodied by *kothis* and *narans*; they may partner with both *kothis* and *narans*. *Hijras*—in this configuration—rank
themselves the most authentic of *kothis*, deserving the most respect (*izzat*) in the community. Thus, the gender system here is seen as categorised on the basis of practice rather than anatomy into ‘men’ (*panthis*) and ‘not men’ (*kothis* and *narans*). It may also be noted that gender identities are predicated on desire lines—sexual-relations between masculine and feminine even when these are not tied to biological sex.

Similarly, according to Sinnott (2008), *Toms* are masculine-identified women who present their masculinity through their dressing style and their personality and on the basis of their attraction to feminine-identified women who may have sex with *Toms* or with men. *Toms* do not try to pass as male and consider themselves to be women with masculine souls. Thus here we see that gender cannot be seen as mapping neatly onto sex and as an interaction between male and female sexes.

### 1.4.2 Male and Female Sexuality and Culture

A phenomenon that is observed cross-culturally is what is commonly referred to as “the double standard” for men and women with regard to sex outside the conjugal unit—here men escape societal censure to a greater extent than women and women’s sexuality is regulated to a greater extent than men’s. Biologically determinist discourses such as “men are driven by uncontrollable sexual drives” are prevalent in contemporary advanced industrial societies of the West such as Britain (Hollway 1998) and justify such unequal practices. According to Hollway, the male sexual-drive discourse and the have-hold discourse—where according to Christian scriptures, sex is correct only when within marriage and toward the formation of a family—presents men with a contradiction which they then visit upon women. This results in the creation of the “good woman” who one marries (the Madonna) and the “bad woman” (the Whore): the Madonna-Whore syndrome. This in turn links to the control of female sexuality because every “good woman” is a potential “fallen woman” at risk of being overwhelmed by uncontrollable sexual urges.

These dynamics can also be observed in Islamic culture (Mernissi, 1987) as also in Hindu societies (Kakar, 1989). Fatima Mernissi, observes how there are two contradictory understandings around female sexuality in Muslim society—the explicit theory of female sexuality casts them as passive and deriving pleasure from submission to male desire, but the implicit theory casts them as seductive active pursuers of their desire and posing a danger to male rationality. Again, these competing constructions result in the notion of women as needing protection from men as also requiring control of their own sexuality for the good of society. Sudhir Kakar (1989) in the Indian context, points to similar notions of the “mother-whore-partner-in-ritual trichotomy” in the Manusmriti (ancient Hindu laws of conduct ascribed to Brahma). Kakar notes the phrase: “Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her son protects her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.” This, Kakar says refers to a protection not from external danger but from a woman’s inner sexual proclivities. A subsequent verse supports this interpretation; this verse chastises the father who does not give his daughter away in marriage at puberty and the husband who does not satisfy her sexually when she in her season (*ritu*).

Such conceptions of female sexuality ties in with the female body being seen as the site for the protection and maintenance of family honour. Lila Abu-Lughold
Sexuality and Gender

(2009) studies the wedding rituals of a Bedouin community in Egypt’s Western Desert for discourses of sexuality circulating therein. Rituals at the wedding involve public defloration of the bride by the groom with much significance given to the consequent blood stained sheet on which she rests, which is publicly displayed. Lughold observes how weddings become an occasion where families find themselves in some rivalry, the honour of each at stake in the competition between the bride who fights against the groom who has to penetrate her. In this Muslim community, sexuality is not a private playing out between two individuals but owned publicly by the community or the families of the bride and the groom. Interestingly, while outsiders are scandalised by the “barbaric” nature of this ritual and notes the humiliation of women involved Bedouin women are in turn scandalised by how pleasure and enjoyment are brought to the fore-front when sex becomes a private affair between the bride and the groom in non-Bedouin Egyptian wedding rituals.

Similar debates frame the wearing of the Burqa or the veil by Muslim women in Islamic cultures. From a modern feminist perspective, the veil represents repressive control of female sexuality; however, Lama Abu Odeh (1997) shows how for many Arab women, the veil represents a resistance to objectification of their bodies by the capitalist gaze and represents a certain freedom for women who participate in the public world by shielding them from unwanted attention. Other studies report how sexuality is not repressed in the covering of the body but many men and women in Muslim society see the privacy around the body as heightening pleasure in the knowledge that they are the only people who will view their partners body, thereby heightening intimacy.

1.4.3 Kinship and Sexuality

In many cultures, sexuality and kinship are intricately connected issues. This is because dominant sexual moralities frame heterosexual relations within marriage as the only legitimate means to forming families or kinship bonds. What is valued here is the “blood tie” (order of nature) over the other forms of relationship, such as marriage for instance, which is formed through laws of social origin (order of law). Thus, the sexual relationship between man and woman become an important component of the idea of kinship. However, David Schneider (1968) in his study of kinship amongst the Yap in the Pacific Rim found that in the Yap community, pregnancy is not seen as linked to sexuality or sexual intercourse and fatherhood is defined by a man’s ability to care for a child more than his role as a progenitor.

This study shows how what most cultures take to be natural or commonsensical (relations as blood-relationships) is in fact a social or cultural construction specific to particular cultures or points in history. Such an understanding paves the way to understand “alternative” forms of family and kinship as followed by people of marginalised sexualities and gender identities. Judith Butler (1993) analyses the documentary film Paris is Burning by Jenny Livingston (1990), which studies the ball culture of New York and the African-American, Latino gay and transgendered people involved in it. Balls are highly competitive events where participants have to “walk” or perform set themes and are judged for their “realness” (adhering to high-class femininity for example). These participants come from various “houses”, each with its own “mother” which serve as surrogate families in place of their real families which often reject them on account of their sexual or gender identities. According to Butler, this can be seen as a
resignification or a process of attaching new meanings to - and thereby destabilising of heteronormative family configurations.

A parallel to this can be found in the patterns of kinship followed by the *hijra* community in India. An authenticating criterion for the *hijra* identity is their affiliation and social obligation to one of the *hijra* houses or lineages in the community. By engaging in a specific *hijra* kinship ritual, individuals not only acquire a guru or teacher within the community but also signify their membership in the particular house/lineage to which the teacher belongs.

Alternative forms of kinship are also formed at the junctures of culture and technological advancement. In Europe and North America, activism and advocacy by gay and lesbian groups has won these groups in some countries the right to same-sex marriage; Netherlands in 2001 was the first country to institute this. In some countries, civil unions or registered partnerships between same-sex couples allow them rights comparable to marriage rights, though with some restrictions such as the right to adopt. In addition, in the 80s technological advancement has resulted in many assisted reproduction technologies. In in-vivo fertilisation of IVF, the ova is fertilised by the sperm in a petridish and then placed in the woman’s uterus. Either the sperm or the ovum could be obtained via donation. This means that sexuality has been delinked from reproduction and family formation. In many countries, such donations are regulated by the law and even prohibited. Surrogacy further complicates the situation in that a couple can approach another woman to carry through the pregnancy. These technologies alter the meaning of motherhood to include three meanings; the mother is the one who a) provides the ovum, b) who gestates the baby. In all of these arrangements, a third party is introduced into the traditional conjugality and to many people this is evocative of adultery or non-monogamy. Therefore, such procedures often become the focus of social, political and religious censure.

1.5 HISTORY OF SEXUALITY IN INDIA: LESBIAN GAY BISEXUAL TRANSGENDER QUEER (LGBT-Q) POLITICS

Research into literature across history in various Indian languages has demonstrated how India has a long history of multiple sexualities and non-gender identities that do not fall into the man-woman binary (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000 cited in Menon, 2007). In this context, Vanita talks of several language terms such as *tritiya prakriti* (the third nature, for men who prefer sex with men) in the fourth century Kamasutra; *swayamvara sakhi* in an 11th century Sanskrit text (for women choosing women as life partner), and *chapti* for female to female sexual activity. The non-binary gender system underlying the *hijra* identity also has a long history in both Hinduism as also Muslim cultural traditions in India. In Hinduism, *hijras* identify with figures such as Arjun of Mahabharata, who lived for a year in the guise of a eunuch during exile while participating as dancer at weddings and births; this gives legitimacy to the ritual contexts in which *hijras* perform (Nanda 2011). Similarly, Shiva as Ardhanarishvara (vertically divided half-man/half-woman) as also certain female avatars of Vishnu are other figures that *hijras* identify with. *Hijras* also enjoyed the historical role of the “eunuch” in the five hundred year history of Muslim court culture in India.
It was only in the 19th century and with the advent of modernity specifically through British rule in India that these sexualities and gender identities faced systematic erasure in the bid to create the modern nation state with the heteronormative family as a chief institution within it. In 19th century, British introduced the anti-sodomy law of 1860 England in India via Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code thereby criminalising same-sex activity – which had been hitherto invisible to the law. Likewise, hijras under colonial classification were categorised as one of the “criminal castes” alongside their removal from any royal protection through an erasure of the traditional royal patronage they had previously enjoyed.

A Foucauldian analysis can here show how the modern ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ as personages (not sexual acts or unions as evidenced in ancient Indian languages) entered the Indian lexicon as sites of both oppression and resistance to draconian laws as codified under Section 377 IPC. Thus, the law and queer movements that resist the law give a new significance to same-sex activities and unions, creating identities such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and groups of people with experiences that can be understood in terms of ‘gay and ‘lesbian’.

In India, these terms as also the politics surrounding these terms came into the public space/discourse with the AIDS epidemic and international funding for HIV/AIDS prevention in India in the mid to late 1990s (Menon, 2007). While the aims of these NGO housed programmes was AIDS prevention, it had unintended consequences in terms of opening up space for the articulation of non-normative sexualities as is practiced by sex-workers and “gay” and “lesbian” people. Thus discourses of health and medicine aimed at regulating sexuality, paradoxically opened up ways to articulate non-normative sexualities.

Reddy and Nanda (2009) show how the hijras of modern India are not just a ‘traditional’ sexual category but has also become a contemporary identity formed at the intersections of religion and politics. Here, ‘tradition’ comes to be employed towards ‘modern’ ends in contemporary India. Thus, hijra candidates can capitalise on the religious basis of their identities, their distance from family, gender and caste affiliations as also their sannyasi or ascetic leanings. This can be understood as a re-inscribing of the status-quo and of discourses that are oppressive (such as Hindu nationalism) but may also be read as creative ways in which a community that has been systematically marginalised attempts to stake a place for itself in a world intolerant of multiplicities and difference.

### 1.6 SUMMARY

This module problematised the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality as they are understood within various frameworks of academic and/or popular understanding. Biological explanations typically draw on genetic, hormonal or sociobiological (evolutionary theory) accounts of gender and sexuality and are often employed to defend the normative or to veil over the social and political construction of gender and sexuality. Feminism provides some conceptual framework to understand the subjugation of women by men through sexuality and sexual identities. Psychoanalysis is another tradition that helps to understand how early childhood dynamics and cultural constructions of right and wrong kinds of sexuality produces sexual and gendered subjects. Foucault introduces the notion of power and discourse as shaping the body and provides another
framework for understanding the interaction of nature and nurture. This framework of understanding is extended in the work of Judith Butler who takes discourse back to early childhood dynamics as examined by Freud.

The module next examines the question of the relation between sex, gender and sexuality through an anthropological framework of understanding that looks at the manner in which sexuality is constructed through a negotiation of meanings in symbols and practices. Different cultural configurations allow for a variety of indexing of gender identities that is different from the gender binary of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ that neatly maps onto sexed differences in reproductive abilities. A pan-cultural phenomenon is the control of female sexuality, even as the precise contours of meaning this takes finds different shades in Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Cultural values also inform what is understood to be kinship across the world; the traditional Western notions of sexual relations (and blood ties) at the core of kinship is challenged by cultural configurations elsewhere; this finds a modern parallel in new patterns of kinship that erotic minorities follow, aided as they are by technologies of assisted reproduction and regulated surrogacy. Finally, the module concludes with a consideration of how some of these frameworks as discussed in the module have helped to understand LGBT-Q politics in India.

References


Sexuality and Gender


**Suggested Reading**


**Sample Questions**

1) What are some of the problems with the biological explanations of gender and sexuality differences?

2) Explain the Butlerian concept of ‘performativity’. Deliberate the potential this term holds for a politics of transformation (towards a world tolerant of difference).

3) What has anthropology offered to widen the narrow definition linking sex, gender and sexuality that dominates the ‘modern’ world today?

4) What is the Madonna-Whore syndrome?

5) What is the history of Indian sexuality from a Foucaultian perspective?