

Sex: Who are They? Robi Chakravorti

The title of the article is based on a silly comment made by a member of the American Indian tribe I found in a TV interview years ago. On a hill-top once asked, "What do you think of sex?" He answered "Who are they?" He interpreted sex as something plural. This can be described as complexity of the term sex and its diversity in socio-historical contexts. Seen in a positive context, sex is the source of creation. As one writer wrote, "Millions and millions of spermatozoa, one of them clicked and I was born.".

Non-academic writers like poets and novelists sometimes make comments which are insightful. I present two dramatic descriptions of sexual acts seen at a biological level, presented by two famous British writers. W B Yeats, is reported to have written, "Tragedy of love is that it has pitched its tent in the place of excrement." Aldous Huxley once wrote, about sexual act "The posture is ridiculous, pleasure is momentary."

When we compare the biological side of sexual acts as described this way with the romantic and cultural side, we can notice a gap between the biological view and sociological view. From the psychological viewpoint, one can label sexual act as instinct. If one uses Freudian viewpoint, it is sometimes related to Oedipus and Electra complex which can be described as buried episodes of childhood. According to an article in the *London Times* (May 3, 2006), Freudian psycho-analysis has been sidelined. "The 'id' is out, the 'super-ego' is reduced. Freudian psychoanalysis has been replaced by cognitive behavioral theory."

From the sociological viewpoint, implications of sexual acts seen from biological and psychological viewpoints are not as relevant as seen from socio-cultural viewpoint. Sexual acts may appear odd as seen biologically or inwardly inspirational as viewed psychologically but its role in development of romance and family values differs in different societies in different forms.

Bertrand Russell in his book, *Marriage and Morals* (1929) pointed out that sexual act is not in the strictest sense instinctive. "It is not uncommon for doctors to be asked by married couples of some years' standing for advice as to how to get children, and to find on examination that the couples have not known how to perform intercourse." This was written years ago. But it has contemporary validity in many cases, mostly in Third World countries and tribal areas. Even the process of so-called modernization has not solved this problem one hundred percent. I have known some cases of this sort in India.

The instinctual aspect of sex among humankind can be questioned if viewed from biological evolution viewpoint. For nonhuman species, the main determinants may appear to be inherent, instinctual in nature, although some amount of learning is also apparent in animal behavior. Compared to lower animals human sexual behavior is determined more by sociocultural and behavioral variables. (*Human Sexuality : Current Perspectives*, Jack Sandier, Marilyn Myerson, Bill N Kinder," 1980)

From social-psychological viewpoint, the sex-based attraction at social level can grow as symbolic interaction. It grows in the social process of interaction manners before leading to the potentiality of biological forms of sexual acts. If symbolism is interpreted as images, one can view differential man-woman attractions as symbolic interaction. If one falls in love, it is not because he or she is biologically most sexy from all viewpoints, but because specific interpersonal image-formation symbolises attraction. The image is, also, not a naked truth. It is culturally developed through the use of dress, cosmetics, manners.

As a British saying goes, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." It means that what is romantic attraction in the perspective of one person may not be so in another person's perspective. The expression of sex-based romantic approval also takes different forms in different times in terms of the society and culture where it is activated, individually and groupwise.

Let me present a case study of this complexity from India. A classic Hindu treatise on love and social conduct called *Kama Sutra* attributed to a Hindu sage, claimed to have been written 4th century AD gives detailed instructions on erotic techniques, aphrodisiac recipes and charms. Love-play, according to the book, was manifold and thoroughly classified; thus the *Kama Sutra* defines no less than sixteen types of kiss. (*The Wonder that was India*, A L Basham, 1989).

Some Hindu temples have decorative sculptures on the walls displaying naked men and women and dramatic versions of sexual act. A book entitled *Kama Kalpa* or *The Hindu Ritual of Love* (P Thomas, 1956) presents several pictures of such sculptures of amorous pose on some Hindu temple walls. A Penguin edition of *Kama Sutra* displays pictures of some such sculptures on the cover of the book.

This is one aspect of Hindu culture seen in historic perspective. In contemporary times, conservative approach to sex and marriage dominates behavior. Pre-puberty marriage and demand for dowry during marriage have been a well-accepted norm for a long time. It is practised often today along with arranged marriage. While this type of traditional conservative approach dominates culture it coexists with well-known areas of prostitutes in many cities. In Kolkata it is called "Sonagachi" which can be translated as Area with golden trees! This is an example of what can be described as a diversity in socio-historical contexts of sex-related behavior. □□□