

# In Plainspeak

*A digital magazine on sexuality in the Global South*

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## CLASS AND SEXUALITY: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF ONLINE SPACES

June 1, 2019 · Rupsa Mallik · 0 Comments

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THEMES



*In Plainspeak* publishes two issues with a theme every month. A cross-cutting theme across all forthcoming issues in 2019 is how we can expand safe, inclusive sexuality-affirming spaces.

THIS ISSUE:

**June 2019**

**Class and Sexuality – II Issue – June 15, 2019**

Sexuality is never simply a sum total of personal revelations – sure, it is the amalgam of our desires, our identities, our expression, but it is also at odds with, or in tandem with various external social structures. Class,

In this article I explore how information and communication technologies (ICTs) are blurring and redefining subjective experiences of class and sexuality for adolescents and young people in India. The questions that guide this are – Can the online space and young people’s engagement with it shift the class-based bias in how content on sexuality is consumed as well as produced? How does the broader reach of sexuality content enable those who are otherwise limited by material and structural constraints to develop a more expansive and informed worldview about sexuality? Does access to content through digital interventions allow young people to find loopholes in the otherwise rigid cultural and social norms that continue to exert control over their sexuality?

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To be able to explore these questions it is important to first examine young people’s access to and use of digital technologies. Data collected as part of a research study by the Population Council titled ‘Understanding the lives of adolescents and young adults (UDAYA)’ in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, India and published in 2017, provide important insights about young people’s access to mobile phones, internet and social media. Findings from Bihar<sup>[1]</sup> show that penetration of internet and social media remains limited but is growing, parents still exert considerable control over young people’s access to the Internet and there is a significant rural and gender disadvantage in access to information and communication technology. One finding that does stand out is the fact that for those that are able to access content over phones and the Internet, sex is not an unmentionable topic. In the study this was measured through a question about respondents’ exposure to pornographic material. This study provides robust user-centric data about young people’s access to and use of digital

one such social structure, is deeply pervasive (though often insidiously so), determining our access, our privilege, our cultural milieu, our knowledge, and our agency, whether we’re aware of it or not. And with the changing degrees of access, privilege, knowledge, and agency, come variations in how we explore and experience sexuality; in how we can be empowered or be stripped of power in expressing our sexuality. And sometimes, our expressions of sexuality cause us to be placed on what may be considered a ‘lower rung on the class ladder’, as only too many sexual dissidents have experienced. While class lines can be divisive, there are also experiences that cut across lines, that are universal, and that connect us. And because our overarching theme for all forthcoming issues is to expand safe, inclusive, sexuality-affirming spaces, we look at that too in the June issue of *In Plainspeak* as we explore how class influences sexuality and vice versa.

**July 2019**

***Erotica and Sexuality – I Issue – July 1, 2019***

*Erotica* tends to evoke associations of the forbidden and scandalous, but also the immensely fascinating. In a world where honest conversations around sexuality are rare, where real stories of desire and pleasure are hard to come by, *erotica* is often our route to assuaging our sexual curiosities. Whether in print or online, whether consumed surreptitiously or openly, *erotica* is rich and diverse

media. It confirms the earlier anecdotal understanding about the growing diffusion of technology, particularly mobile phones, in rural and urban populations, among genders, across wealth quintiles and those with varied educational attainment.

Since the time of the study, that already highlighted the growing trend with regard to young people's access to and use of mobile phones, significant transformations have taken place. The [Mary Meeker annual Internet trends report for 2017](#)[2] highlights two major factors driving this. The first is the decline in the prices of smartphones, and the second is the fall in Internet data prices, which was to a large extent spurred by Reliance Jio – the telecommunications arm of India's largest business conglomerate – that launched its service in September 2016. It offered free data to users. This resulted in large numbers of users of mobile phones, particularly young people, being able to afford Internet services and also forced other service providers to reduce the cost of their services.

Cheaper access to ICTs has served to reduce barriers that exist for those from marginalised economic and social classes to access information and entertainment and enables a different sort of social mobility that is delinked from actual material and social constraints measured in terms of education and occupation. More importantly, and specific to this article access to the digital world has served to open up past restrictions with regard to who is able to consume and produce content related to sexuality.

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What is it that preoccupies most young people? This is again something that is anecdotally known through offline engagement. However, now as a result of a number of online digital and technology based interventions we have more

– offering a glimpse into an endless expanse of fantasies and possibilities. To some, it is instant gratification. To some, it is an active reclamation of narratives of sex, sexuality, sexual identity, and sexual wellbeing. To some, it is a reinforcing of the very same heteropatriarchal structures we're looking to free ourselves from. But are such distinctions really necessary when erotica is essentially a subjective medium, or is it important to contemplate the kind of agency (or the lack thereof) erotica gives us? The July issue of *In Plainspeak* seeks to tackle these various questions around erotica, and attempts to examine its potential for being a safe, inclusive, sexuality-affirming space.

#### August 2019

#### Mobility and Sexuality – I Issue – August 1, 2019

We are perpetually in motion – changing, shifting, growing, migrating – never remaining at the same physical or emotional place we are in at a particular moment. Our sexuality too is never a constant – it may evolve over time, it may 'move' from one expression of it to another, it may be more freely expressed in one environment, or shied away from in another environment. Whether this mobility is defined by one's physical ability to move, or by social and cultural factors (like one's gender or sexual identity, one's economic position, and so on) that inhibit or enable one's access to spaces and services, it still directly influences the way one experiences and comes to terms with one's sexuality. The degree to which one has the

'data' to support this understanding. In this article I use the example of a mobile phone based interactive voice response system (IVRS) platform *Kahi Ankahi Baatein* (Saying the Unsaid) that provides sexual and reproductive health and rights information (SRHR) to young people. This platform is jointly run and managed by CREA, TARSHI, Gram Vaani and Maara. One of the channels on this platform is a Sawal-Jawab (Question and Answer) channel. Callers can record questions answers to which are posted on the infoline. What are the callers posting on? The leading topics include myths and misconceptions with regard to sex, sexual desire, consent and relationships, sex and pregnancy, sexual problems, masturbation, relationships and contraception, safe sex, puberty, virginity and homosexuality. A voluntary survey administered as part of the infoline provides important data with regard to the background of callers. Till date calls have been received from practically every State and Union Territory in India. Demographic profile of callers: 70 percent male, 27 percent women and 3 percent transgender persons. More than half are unmarried (69%), more than half the female callers (55%) report being below 18 years of age and the male caller profile of those below 18 years is also close to 50 percent.

freedom to be 'mobile' in a space can often determine whether one's sexuality can truly be expressed in the way one wants to express it and whether it can flourish. Reciprocally, one's sexuality may also restrict or expand one's mobility (physical, social, economic and so on). The August issue of *In Plainspeak* seeks to delve into how mobility and sexuality are interlinked, while also contemplating what the link between mobility and sexuality means in the context of creating safe, inclusive, sexuality-affirming spaces.

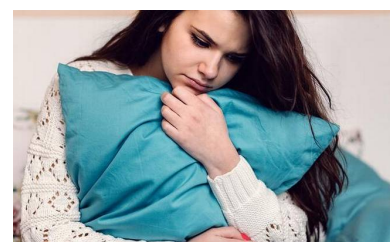
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## CORNERS



Book Corner: Excerpt: Feminism, Gender Politics and Resistance in Indian Democracy



*Word cloud of analysis by Quicksand of Kahi Ankahi Baatein infoline on most used words by callers when they ask questions*

In unpacking class as a social category through the lens of young people accessing SRHR content via an infoline it is possible to conclude that broader reach of sexuality content does enable those who are otherwise limited by material and structural constraints to develop a more expansive and informed worldview about sexuality. It is also possible to claim that accessing content through digital interventions allows young people to find loopholes in the otherwise rigid cultural and social norms that continue to exert control over their sexuality.

Social mobility in contemporary, digitally driven lives needs to be understood differently and beyond material conditions that typically denominate class and determine class-based norms and barriers. The online space can increasingly become a site for sexual and class transgressions.

Social and material barriers too can appear to be diffused as the online space unlike public sites begins to offer diverse people from varied backgrounds 'egalitarian' access to information related to sex and sexuality that is otherwise inaccessible for them. One domain where this happens is the way language and terminology shift as a result of the opening up of online space to diverse audiences. Examples of this can be seen not just on the IVRS platform *Kahi Ankahi Baatein* but also other online platforms such as [Agents of Ishq](#), [Feminism in India](#) and [Love Matters](#) all of which have broadened their approach to produce and ensure interactions in Hindi on topics related to sexuality that has opened up space for diverse engagement.

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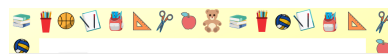
स्वयं की

TARSHI Corner: Hindi Wellbeing and Sexuality



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In conclusion, the limited point that can be made is that technology has helped mediate class-based distinctions in the way young people are able to access information on sexuality. This provides a momentary illusion of transcending class-based limitations. There is something to be said about the radical potential of more people, particularly those that have traditionally been excluded from accessing information and having voice, to be able to transform the nature and content of the conversations we have on sexuality. This article, however, does not seek to make the claim that this in anyway transforms the material and structural constraints that define the subjective experience of class and sexuality.

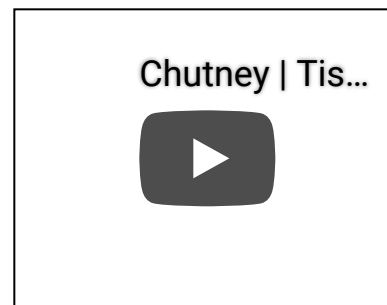
[1]SANTHYA, K.G., R. ACHARYA, N. PANDEY ET AL. 2017.

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVES OF ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS (UDAYA) IN BIHAR, INDIA. NEW DELHI: POPULATION COUNCIL

[2]MEHTA, IVAN, 2017. RELIANCE JIO IS DRIVING INDIAN INTERNET GROWTH, SAYS THE MARY MEEKER REPORT

[HTTPS://WWW.HUFFINGTONPOST.IN/2017/06/01/RELIANCE-JIO-IS-DRIVING-INDIAN-INTERNET-GROWTH-SAYS-THE-MARY-ME\\_A\\_22120777/](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/06/01/reliance-jio-is-driving-indian-internet-growth-says-the-mary-me_a_22120777/)

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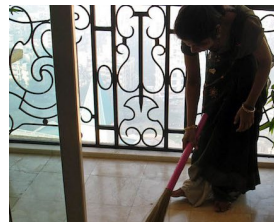
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