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April 24, 2013

## Ta(!)king sex beyond English

By Meenu Pandey

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*This is the second of a series of posts written from the experiences at CREA of implementing a program called "Count Me IN! It's My Body: Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Young Girls through Sports". CREA is a feminist human rights organization based in Delhi ([www.creaworld.org](http://www.creaworld.org)).*

(Take fifteen seconds for each of these words.)

Think of one regional language word each for the following: Consent. Assumption. Choice. Pleasure. Agency.

These are some of the words which form the foundation of the world of sexual rights. How many did you get?

How does one talk of sexuality? How does one express desire and consent? How does one articulate violation? What do we call the body parts, what do we call ourselves? How do we claim identities or demand space and rights on sexuality? In societies where conversations about sex are silenced, how do we talk about our everyday lives, which are as much about sexual boundaries and norms as they are about the politics of caste, religion, gender, class and so much more besides.

Working on sexuality in local languages is not only crucial but radical. It is radical because it dispels the myth that most of sexuality work happens in the 'English world'. It is also radical because it demonstrates that no cultures are devoid of sexuality. This means, saying that "we don't have the language to talk of sexuality" isn't correct. A friend from Meem[i], Lebanon, berating the mainstream western understanding around the 'Middle East' and sexuality, said recently to me, "it's not that we don't talk of sexuality, it could be that we just don't call it sexuality."

Also, the concept of sexuality isn't unpacked in a uniform way everywhere. Different meanings are made of it in different contexts. A group of young girls we work with from Jharkhand, when asked what they understood by sexuality, said in unison, "sexuality means what we like and don't like in all aspects of life."

There are many terms, words and connotations that find space in a regional language, but not in English. Hindi offers the space for many terms that connote a cultural construct – such as *Hijra*. There is no equivalent term in English for *Hijra* – the only word that comes closest is 'transgender', an unsatisfactory translation. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's work[iii] brings together diverse texts that uncover stories of same-sex desire and gender diversity, spanning centuries of the subcontinent's history and numerous linguistic traditions. Non-English speaking people have not needed English to claim and articulate their realities. Their lives are lived, and desires expressed in a manner they find appropriate for themselves.

In its initial phase of work, sexual rights activists in India were constantly told that poverty was a far more pressing issue than sexuality. These activists brought forth an understanding of intersectionality as a perspective to do any work related to human rights. This perspective also sheds light on access to language in which work is done and the need to work in different local languages is something that became clear fairly earlier on. Since most of the activists who began this work were themselves urban and English speaking, their work would be inaccessible, possibly culturally-alien, if it remained only in the realm of English. Sexuality is a deeply cultural thing – in terms of its specific taboos, the controls, the ways in which it is allowed to be expressed, the breaking of norms, articulation of experiences which are different, naming desire. In India, how can these multilayered cultural manifestations ever be fully expressed in English, without losing its richness?

*A few friends decided to say words which we used for our nether regions. Cunt was one of the most used. We felt very empowered, smugly so. At some point one of us said, but what are the non-english words? We came up with a few, choot being one of them. None of us appropriated a single one of those words for ourselves or our amorous moments. We were empowered in English. Elsewhere, we were as good as people who didn't/couldn't say cunt.[iii]*

One of the challenges of working in Hindi is that sexualised words often also used as slang, and are therefore considered obscene, or are stigmatised. It could feel less personalised. But what is it really that makes us uncomfortable? Could it be that for the English speaking people, our language of thinking limits our expressions around sexuality?

In this work in Hindi, creating new language, and sometimes modifying the existing language becomes



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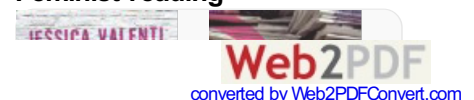
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crucial to convey meaning. [iv] In the latest edition of the annual Hindi journal on sexual and reproductive health and rights, *Reproductive Health Matters (RHM)*, themed Abortion and Rights, we wanted to highlight the element of 'right to choice' for termination of pregnancy. [v] The popular hindi term, *garbh paat* seemed stigmatised at one level and on further research, it was clear that its literal translation means miscarriage. To keep the right to choice about one's body and life inextricably linked to induced abortion, we chose to use a lesser used but thought provoking term, *garbh samaapan* (termination of pregnancy). Such experiments in translation and creation of a new language to talk about sexuality and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), keeps our work political.

Another crucial point is about the kind of hindi scholarship around sexuality being created. Is it influenced by the assumption that theory is for English-speakers, while practice is for non-English speakers? This despite the interconnections between practice and theory, and the influence our everyday worlds and their construction have on theory. The diversity in resources available on sexuality in English isn't the same as that in Hindi. We felt the need for Hindi RHM, a peer reviewed journal, precisely because such theoretical scholarship was not available for Hindi speaking activists. The Institutes on Sexuality, Gender and Rights in Hindi have as much reading and engaging with theory as the English Institutes.

Sometimes popularising certain English terms may make more sense. The term Intersex in Hindi would be *antarlingi*. Not only does this term in Hindi have no resonance in colloquial Hindi, it is a highly *sanskritised* way of using language, which we are, very consciously, trying to move away from. The words sex, transgender, surrogate, sex work are some more of such examples.

As part of our sports and SRHR program, It's My Body, we produced resources for young girls. We wanted to steer clear of the producing material which looks like SRHR outcomes – HIV transmission and menstruation. We realised that we need to think about the kind of language we want to use. We wanted to talk not only of menstrual cycle, but how young girls should have information around their bodies. We wanted to not only talk of how to have safe sex, but that young people should be able to decide who they want to have sex with, when and also have the knowledge, confidence and agency to be able to say yes, no as well as maybe. We decided to use words like *sahmati*, *poorv-anumaan*, *chaahat*, *chunaav*, *haan*, *naa*, *pasand* – the language used in the work with the groups of young girls. We designed them in a way so girls can keep them hidden, if they needed to; to take out and discuss and read with peers when they felt comfortable.

A conversation on language and sexuality is incomplete without thinking about who is creating the Hindi scholarship in the sexuality world. The people who live in both 'English and Hindi worlds' are different from people who live in 'Hindi worlds'. If we are clear that practitioners are also capable of creating scholarship (as we should be!), a larger objective of creating Hindi scholarship on sexuality must be to put this work in the hands of people for whom English is not the first language. That will alter the canvas of negotiating the language of sexuality.

\*

*Author's note – Big thank you to S. Vinita for thinking this through with me and Sarjana and Vrinda for their very useful feedback.*

[i] [www.meemgroup.org](http://www.meemgroup.org)

[ii] Same-Sex Love in India, Readings from Literature and History: Edited: Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, Macmillan 2000

[iii] An old conversation between a group of English speaking friends.

[iv] This blogpost focuses on Hindi as a language but the arguments are relevant for any regional language.

[v] Reproductive Health Matters (RHM) is an independent charity, producing in-depth publications on reproductive and sexual health and rights for an international, multi-disciplinary audience.

<http://www.rhmjournal.org.uk/> CREA has collaborated with RHM since 2005 to bring out annual editions of the journal in Hindi.

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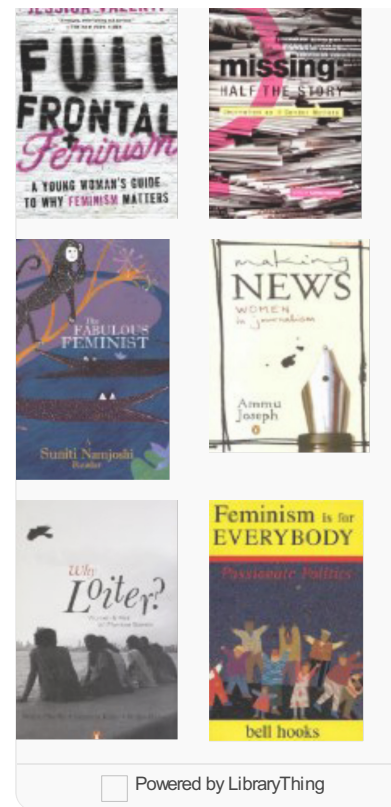
Meenu Pandey works as the Program Coordinator – Global South Knowledge Resources at CREA. She works on creating scholarship in Hindi on gender and sexuality. She is the co-editor of *Close, Too Close: The Tranquebar book of Queer Erotica*.

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