

The Marginality of Liminality: Experiences of Sexualizing University Spaces in India

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I. Of Liminal Spaces

A simple understanding with which I start this essay is that all spaces are diverse, and while that is so, within all such spaces there are tensions to make the experience of being a part of those spaces homogeneous, and resistances to maintain their heterogeneity. Along with this there is another contention that I take on board: that is the notion of 'limit' or 'boundaries' that signify or define a space, and whether such an approach contradicts our notion of what an 'open space' is. Does open mean 'no boundaries', or does it mean 'ever-expanding boundaries'? Throughout this essay I intend to use the concept of 'open space', both literally and metaphorically for purposes of understanding how it gets created, constricted and destructed, only to get re-created within the confines of a space called the university/college.

I will attempt to understand how a constant restructuring of 'open spaces' impacts on the processes of engagement for those who inhabit, wish to inhabit, or do not wish to inhabit these spaces. An exploration of this nature becomes necessary in times when student politics in India borders on the nearly-blurred line between 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' conservatism – both sides claiming to have entirely different stands on political ideology, yet being highly homophobic, to the extent of engaging in virulent forms of homophobia – through the imposition of disciplinary actions, censorship of speech and similar acts.¹ However, I do think that the questions that I will raise can find resonances within campuses in most parts of the world, irrespective of the differences in political cultures.

What I intend to do is to talk about the socio-political life of 'open spaces' within university/college campuses and their connection to experiences of marginality, disadvantage, agency and diversity. I treat 'open spaces' as organic, ever changing – in size, content and conviction. This essay emerges out of my work as a human rights education activist and trainer for the past several years where one of my primary aims has been to push for 'inclusive' means of engaging in dialogue. This is an interesting point; my attempts at effecting dialogue have always been to allow for the opening up of spaces where more 'talk' can happen. But only over time have I realised that one of the major components of what I

¹ This observation emerges from the personal experience of the author of doing work with student groups in colleges across India. The two major political student unions in India are the 'left-wing' Student Federation of India, and the 'right-wing' Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad. Though both have distinctly separate agendas, their stand on sexuality informed by strong 'nationalist' ideas of respectability. Especially post the '80s and '90s engagement of campus politics with caste-based and religion-based issues (the Mandal-Masjid era) – sexuality and its intersections with these have been literally shoved under the proverbial carpet of 'morality'.

understand as an 'open space' is also where 'no talk' can happen, and it could remain that way without prejudice to those choosing not to talk.

I will illustrate my experiences of negotiating the creation of 'open spaces' with the help of some of the exercises that I've used during my human rights education trainings and workshops with university students. But before I do that in the third section of this essay, let me erect a semi-theoretical, and semi-experiential superstructure within which we shall chart our journey to understand whether 'open spaces' are indeed open or not. Let me clarify here that in this essay I have no proposition; what I present are fragmented thoughts that, much like 'open spaces' gather coherence through continuous rigorous engagement.

For me, 'openness' is a liminal concept. Liminality is signified by the feeling of being in-between, indeterminate and transient. It is a situation where you are ready to engage in an ever-unfolding exercise of learning through un-learning. Within an institutional set-up like the university, which in a Foucauldian sense is a system for disciplining human bodies and minds²; 'open space' becomes antithetical to the institution's very existence. Even human rights education (HRE), which aims at promoting tolerance for diversity and respect for human rights is a tool for disciplining students in the most cruelly liberal fashion.

Talking about 'open space' within an institution like a university is a form of dissent. And so it is indeed welcomed by some of us who believe in non-conformity against the dominant. The dilemma starts when you attempt to achieve tolerance for diversity through a disciplining process like HRE. It is like, to give a cheeky twist to Audre Lorde³, re-building the master's house with his own tools and on his terms!

So within an institutional set-up, which prescribes and stipulates rules and regulations for 'appropriate' behaviour, an 'open space', marked by liminality, itself challenges the institution's disciplining agenda. At the same time, an institution that seems open to the idea of 'open spaces', permits student groups to engage in the creation of such spaces through discussion groups, clubs, societies, unions etc only to put in place another version of the disciplining mechanism, but this time on a platter that screams out 'we are liberal and progressive'. Yet, there are strong, invisible processes in place that continue to regulate 'open spaces'. Thus, you have students feeling a matter of pride to be part of the film society of a university/college, for example. This actually leads to turning the liminal potential of the 'open space', of the film society into a mainstream and populist meeting ground for the dominant majority. As an organic space, the film society which promised to be a meeting ground for diverse ideas now starts self-disciplining itself, in turn excluding liminal voices who wish to rupture the society's agenda of 'uniform rationality'.

'Open spaces' signified through ever-expanding boundaries, spaces that are open enough to accommodate differences of all kinds, must have the potential to continuously re-invent their liminality. What unfortunately happens is that the liminal potential remains marginal to the operation of the 'open space', thus making it inconsequential. Forums that continue calling themselves 'open', meaning 'progressive and liberal', ensure their survival through a process of profiling and surveillance that determines the meaning of 'open', and the same

² See generally, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977. In particular look at the discussion on the Panoptical Tower.

³ A Black woman, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet, essayist, and political activist, Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" is part of her book called "Sister Outsider". The essay radically challenges how white people "learn about" racism, or how men "learn about" women. "Sister Outsider" is a collection of essays focusing on race/racism, gender/sexism, sexual identity, and social class as these are enacted in a white-supremist, heterosexist, capitalist patriarchy (i.e. the United States).

time also identifies the physicality of such spaces which can fit this meaning. I will illustrate this with the concept of 'calibration of pain' later in the essay.

This liminal potential of 'open space' to the dominant, invisibilising forces within a university campus can be connected to the concept of bio-power that Foucault had spoken of during one of his lectures in 1976⁴. I do not wish to engage in a discussion on bio-power, but will merely establish this connection. Foucault talks about the disciplining potential of institutionalised learning which focuses on individualised human bodies. But in his work on bio-power, he takes this argument further by talking of a concept called 'bio-politics', which massifies this individual-body focused disciplining process of an institution. I identify the operation of 'open spaces' within university campuses being fraught with the possibility of doing mass disciplining of students, unless its liminal potential can counter the bio-power of the 'open space'. Such should be the 'open space', that its indeterminacy should be the marker of a resistant politics.

II. Sexualising Open Spaces

In conservative terms, the university is a space for learning and value addition. What you learn is governed by a disciplining agenda. If you wish to learn beyond the confines of the classroom, through engagement with varied student forums, you only extend the reach of the university's disciplining agenda, especially when the institute claims to be student friendly and liberal. For me a challenge to this disciplining agenda can be successfully put up only when spaces are created, within or without the classroom set-up that foregrounds liminal voices. All voices which have the potential for rupturing processes that attempt at 'making same', are liminal. Even if silence can shatter the oppressive nature of dominant ideology, it is liminal and thus a potent tool for the creation of a culture of constructive dissent.

My HRE work over the last few years has specifically focused on sexual marginalisation. In this essay I would also primarily draw my illustrations from the dialogical spaces that I have attempted to open up within universities/colleges and how questions of sexuality and difference have resided within those spaces. My first attempt at creating an open 'sexualised' space is to ask: Where does sex live? And where does sexuality reside? In our minds, bodies... in our cultures, attitudes, laws, in our pants, our wallets, in our politics, identities, in our very beings. Wherever we go sex and sexuality follow. They are there, everywhere, obvious by their presence and conspicuous by their absence.

The response is either an eerie silence when it comes to talking about them, or a surfeit of hypervisible symbols. And these happen at the same time: when you have increasing openness about doing 'sex talk' to counter HIV/AIDS, at the same time you have highly conservative mores blaming permissiveness as the primary reason for the spread of the pandemic. And it is just not about AIDS; it is about anything remotely connected to sex and sexuality. You celebrate the strides made by women and at the same time make them responsible for 'attracting' and 'provoking' sexual assault – trading 'freedom' with 'protection'. We talk about 'danger' as the only feeling that can be associated with sex and at the same time compulsively consume 'pleasure'. From condoms and sex toys to a gyrating Rakhi Sawant⁵ in a music video and Midnight Hot lingerie on Fashion TV. Also at the same time we will want dance bars to be closed down in the name of saving today's youth from

⁴ Michel Foucault, Lecture on 17 March 1976, in *Society Must be Defended*, Trans. David Macey, New York: Zone Books, 2003.

⁵ Rakhi Sawant is a well-known artist who is (in)famous for having done some daringly sexual dance sequences in music videos in India.

becoming bad-boys.⁶ We want liberalisation of the economy, unbridled foreign investment to flow in and de-regulation of the private sector and do not want sex-workers to be given labour rights. We want to believe that hunger is more important than sex, yet the right to food never seems to become an issue over which we can have a beer while listening to Queen's 'I want to break free!' Sex has got to be the fodder then.

Sex thus remains an issue that the state addresses within its own constructed notions of conservative sexual morality, denying basic citizenship rights of all erotic-minorities. This exclusion and regulation operates primarily through the operation of law. Even before Independence, India had the archaic 1860 Indian Penal Code (IPC) that was informed by Victorian morality and the diktats of the church. The state uses absurd logic to keep in place discriminatory laws like 'unnatural offences'⁷ to criminalize the lives of persons who are non-heterosexuals.

For some sex still remains a non-issue, for some others it is paramount to their very existence. For some it is beautiful, dazzling, brilliant... for others it is depraving, decadent, immoral and for many it is all that falls in-between dazzle and decadence. Sex is indisputably innate to our being and at the same time remains a highly contested functional terrain.

So what do we make of sex and sexuality? Of what use are they within the paradigm of doing awareness building work with young people in colleges? Are sexual identities as important as caste and religious identities? Will sex education be responsible for increasing promiscuity among young people? Is openness about sex a western import? Do we need the law in our pants, to regulate and tell us how to and how not to have sex? Can we engage in claiming the right to pleasure as strongly as the right to food?

The idea of my workshops is not to simply find answers to these difficult questions, but to try and complicate our understanding of sex and sexuality and their importance in our day-to-day interactions. The 'open space' thus created reaches its liminal potential when it makes us confront our own discomfort with sex and sexuality, and forces us to rethink and interrogate our own approaches to larger issues of disadvantage and diversity. Along with the moral brigade, are we also complicit in perpetuating a conservative sexual morality that views sex and sexuality as inherently 'dirty', from which 'good' and 'decent' people ought to be protected and those capable of doing all the 'dirty' stuff need to be marginalised, penalised and incarcerated?

But one should also ask, why 'sexualise' spaces at all? My response will be that all spaces are inherently sexualised, as they are gendered, casteised, classed and abled. Sexuality seems to fall right at the end of this list, creating a hierarchy of grounds that calibrates the experience of pain. I will return to this in a while.

⁶ Last year the government in the Western Indian state of Maharashtra issued an ordinance to close down 'dance-bars', which are often suspected as being fronts for prostitution, ostensibly because it has an 'immoral' impact on the youth who visit the bars. Surprisingly, the ordinance banned dancing only in small bars, and all 'dance-bars' in hotels with a rating of 3 stars or higher were exempted. See generally, Flavia Agnes, 'Moral' Victories, in Oishik Sircar (ed.) InfoChange Agenda: Sexual Rights in India, Issue 4, January 2006, Pune: Centre for Communication and Development Studies, p. 6.

⁷ Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalizes all acts that are 'against the order of nature'. Although this provision applies universally to both homosexuals as well as heterosexuals, the law actually gets used by the police to threaten, harass and abuse sexually marginalized persons. Over the past decade there has been a growing movement demanding the repeal of this law. In response to a petition filed in the Delhi High Court asking for 'reading down' the section to decriminalize adult, consensual and private sex, the state responded by saying that since there is no other law to tackle child sexual abuse (CSA), sec. 377 will have stay – instead of asking the legislature to pass a separate law on CSA. See generally, Voices Against 377, *Rights for All: Ending Discrimination against Queer Desire under section 377*, New Delhi (2004)

But come to think of it, in a globalised, ‘modern’ and ‘liberal’ India, sex and sexuality’s addresses and residences occupy much larger spaces, much beyond state policies on population control and the law’s regulation of sexuality. This is why it becomes difficult to ignore it, even if you want to. It is in the cover stories and centre spreads of magazines that seem to obsess about the ‘libido quotient’ of Indian women from small towns and do gloss-talk about the emerging identity of the metrosexual male. Sex and sexuality is indeed in our pants now: in the way we dress, why we dress the way we dress and being told how to and how not to dress in colleges, universities and workplaces.

In the use of our performative spaces, both functional and liminal, sex, sexuality and their derivatives get hierarchised and mediated through the public/private, good/bad, aggression/submission, pleasure/danger, permissive/censorious, majority/minority, rights/wrongs binaries and dyads. Somehow that does not give us an opportunity to explore, complicate and celebrate the myriad hues of what sex and sexuality can offer in terms of idea, identity, power, politics and freedom. My workshops have tried to ‘sexualise’ open spaces in universities/colleges exactly with that intent.

Most often it is in our own ways of calibrating pain, privileging one form of disadvantage over another without allowing space for a multiplicity of voices, and sexual voices at that, to flourish, to shout out loud and tell us why sex and sexuality is not only important but are existential exigencies for each one of us, that we fail to recognise their needs as natural urges, demands, claims and rights. Some ‘progressive’ interventions have made certain headway, thanks to the window that HIV/AIDS opened up, but such interventions have only addressed sexuality either for the purposes of perpetuating the rhetoric of ‘safe sex’, as if sex otherwise is always unsafe, and have clinically and emotionally told young people to practice abstinence to uphold moral values and save the ‘family’. And just in case you are ‘deviant’, then such interventions will coercively help you to get treated and prescribe therapies to set your deviance right. And all this happens within a space – that of a discussion group, film club et al – which is ostensibly ‘open’, and claims to be a non-judgmental meeting ground for a variety of ideas.

‘Open Spaces’ within the disciplining processes of university/college set-up, when they do not continuously re-invent their state of liminal flux, turn into impregnable and exclusive comfort zones. Sexualising them is one way of disrupting and puncturing these impregnable and exclusive comfort zones: where we decide what is important for others, rather than listening to their voices... where rights disappear and questions of disadvantage are put at bay. In the next section I discuss three activities that I do with students in campuses across India that have, even marginally, disturbed the peace with which we have ghettoised ‘Open Spaces’, and numbed their liminal potential.

III. Calibrating Pain, Hierarchising Sexuality

In this section I will map some responses that I have received while facilitating my workshops in universities – especially with regard to three specific activities that challenge participants, in the words of Louis Althusser, to ‘push thought to the limits’. That is what I feel has been my journey towards reclaiming the marginalised liminality of ‘Open Spaces’. The responses to these activities have also helped me understand the bio-power that is innate in us. As an activist was quoted by another activist friend: “More often than not, the abuse suffered by subaltern sexual cultures has been made invisible [...] using a convoluted logic that arrogates to itself the ability to calibrate pain. First comes class, then comes caste, then comes gender,

ecology and so on. If there is any space left on this ark of suffering, then sexuality is included as a humble cabin boy. There is no hope of the last being the first in this inheritance of the meek”⁸.

One of the most popular activities that I do is called ‘Body Mapping’⁹. It is a simple exercise where the participants are divided into groups and each group is asked to use chart papers to draw the outline of a human body (preferably of one of the group members), and then mark out the zones/ parts/ organs of pain, pleasure and shame. On completion of the activity each group is asked to present their creations, and then I raise a few questions and open up the discussion. I have done this activity at least a hundred times with different college-groups from across India, and have noticed a remarkable similarity. Almost all groups, never ever mark out the genitalia. In contrast, the eyes, nose, ears, facial hair, even nails are meticulously marked out and identified as areas of pain, pleasure or shame. As soon as they reach below the belt, everything gets put into a single bundle called ‘reproductive organs’/ ‘private parts’. Of course, one understands a certain amount of inhibition that would not permit groups to talk openly about sex. So I do not generally push for responses as to why they did not mark out the genitalia in all its details. What I do instead is raise some other questions: why did they use only four chart papers, when there were plenty in supply? How was it decided as to who will volunteer to be the human body to be outlined?

The use of the number of chart papers can be connected to our own ways of creating space, and allowing that space to accommodate certain kinds of bodies. Similarly, on most occasions it is the person, almost always a woman, with the smallest build who is asked, or volunteers to be outlined. There are inferences to be drawn from these experiences. Would they have thought of creating enough space on the chart paper to accommodate a disabled body? The response would always be that there was no disabled person in the group, so they had not thought about it. Or that it did not occur to them that a disabled body could be sexualized. So I would ask, does that mean the present body represented and marked out on the chart paper is able and complete? It does not have genitalia. So to me it looks so very disabled.

I would then go on to ask the group what they thought was most easy to mark out: pain, pleasure or shame? The response invariably is that it was pain and shame that were most easy. I would connect that to how pain and shame had an unprecedented concentration in the groin region, implying a certain kind of negativity that gets related to sex and sexuality. The activity will then go on to discuss a whole range of other issues connected to how we view sex and sexuality as depraving forces, and hence are unable to both verbally and graphically articulate the positive, pleasurable things associated with it. Of course, I will keep harping back to the larger questions of space creation, and accommodation that is at the crux of this exercise. For instance, they might not be illustrating the genitalia, but are marking it out as zones for pleasure etc., but would they consider accommodating a body in that space which does not have recognisable genitalia, like a body of an intersexed person? The idea of the exercise is to talk about the liminality of physicality and being and how we create spaces to accommodate or dislodge certain kinds of bodies, and their sexuality, according to dominant normative notions of full and able bodies.

⁸ Quoted in Arvind Narrain, *Queer People and the Law*, Imagining Futures, Seminar Issue 524, April 2003

⁹ There are different versions of a ‘Body Mapping’ exercise. This version was introduced to me at the ‘Sexuality and Rights Institute’ 2005 in Pune. See generally, Radhika Chandiramani and Geetanjali Mishra, *Unlearning and Learning: The Sexuality and Rights Institute in India*, in Chandarimani and Mishra (eds.) *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia*, New Delhi: Sage (2005)

Let me now get into another slightly more conceptual exercise that I do where the participants are asked to draw up a 'Sexual Hierarchy'. The concept of sexual hierarchy is borrowed from an influential essay titled 'Thinking Sex'¹⁰, by American anthropologist Gayle Rubin who outlines the rules of sexual conduct which currently have created a sexual hierarchy which places heterosexual, monogamous, married, reproductive sex at the top. Anything deterring from this position, is placed below in varying degrees. The participants are asked to draw up their own sexual hierarchy. The exercise has two main objectives: one, it creates a space for discussing a whole range of sexual practices, and two, gives us an opportunity to connect questions of human rights to sexual marginalisation. But let me explain how I push the boundaries of the workshop's 'open space' towards its liminal limits through this activity. The hierarchisation of sexuality happens because 'society' confuses between sexual identity and sexual behaviour. For instance, take the case of a dear friend who is biologically a man, but feels that there is a woman trapped inside him. And the woman inside him has same-sex preferences. So when he is having sex, of course with another woman, he is engaging in a lesbian act. But when you stand back and watch, what do you see? You see a heterosexual act between a man and a woman. Where would you place my friend on the hierarchy? As a heterosexual, homosexual, transgender?¹¹ The other issue that can get effectively addressed is that sexual rights are not about the right to have sex. Rather if we look at any sexual hierarchy, and try and see what happens to basic citizenship rights, like that of employment, education etc., as we go down the ladder – it becomes evident how those much lower in the hierarchy do not have full and equal access to these basic rights.

In this exercise I infuse three more issues: first, of how class, caste and religion's interaction with sexuality further hierarchise people; and second, how such hierarchies are unknowingly maintained by many of us - urban, articulate, verbose university students. This is where the challenge lies because a lot of those attending a 'sexuality' workshop in a university are those who would like to believe that they are 'open' and 'progressive'. I talk about the simple issue of dress codes and how that acts as a process of guaranteeing access. Like if it was a 'decent' dress code imposed by the college, students would obviously protest. While at the same time, all of us who visit Barista and shopping malls, and discuss sexuality in the confines of a *sheesha* bar would know that it is only us who can gain access to these spaces because of the way we dress. In consequence, we actually obey a self-imposed dress code at many places, thus barring access to such spaces to many people. Another example is that of dress-code protests in colleges. Even those protesting are ones who wear a certain kind of clothing against which the dress code is being imposed. There could be many students who do not dress 'inappropriately' and could yet be against the imposition of codes. Unfortunately, you would hardly find any of them to be part of the forum launching the campaign against the imposition. Not because they do not want to be a part of it, but because of our own self-imposed dress code within that forum from which they have been excluded. Thus, if such a forum is understood to be an 'open space' within the university, it completely fails to be so because it has not attempted to exploit its liminal potential.

Let me connect this to a second example where the college has imposed a dress code and has set up a cell against sexual harassment. This is a known phenomenon in many campuses across the country given the rise in sexual harassment against women students. But the fall-out of such developments – one might want to think of the cell against sexual harassment as an 'open space' too – is that it would then link 'indecent' clothing to 'inviting' harassment.

¹⁰ Gayle Rubin, *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, In Carole S. Vance (Ed.), "Pleasure and Danger: exploring female sexuality", pp. 267–319. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

¹¹ See generally, Oishik Sircar, *Questioning 'Queer'*, in Sircar (ed.) *InfoChange Agenda: Sexual Rights in India*, Issue 4, January 2006, Pune: Centre for Communication and Development Studies, p. 30

Again, this works to hierarchise who can then approach the cell and who cannot – on the basis of her behaviour, clothing and demeanour. The ‘open space’ thus created by the cell against sexual harassment would then work in cohorts with the dress-code guidelines, eventually buying into the disciplining agenda of the institute where freedom would get traded for protectionism.

Third, is the kind of hierarchisation that happens with regard to ‘real’ issues of human rights concern, where the right of displaced persons would gain more currency, and evoke more emotion, than the rights of the sexually marginalised. I go back to the point I made earlier, that sexual rights are not about the right to have sex, but they are about how basic human rights get abrogated on the ground of your sexual preference or orientation. Thus, employment will indeed be an important issue, worth discussing and acting upon, yet employment of sexuality minorities will not be. Based on assumptions like these proactive students would push for the prospectus of their institute to include a non-discrimination clause on caste and religion, but not on sexuality.¹²

The final activity I discuss here is that of Sexual Rights/Wrongs, where the participants, in consensus, are asked to decide what should qualify as sexual rights, meaning acts that should not be criminalised by the state, and which acts should be sexual wrongs. This activity starts in a very interesting fashion where after some thinking all participants say in unison that all acts which are consensual are sexual rights, and those which are not are sexual wrongs. But when I push the limits further and ask them what they mean by consent, then there appear some qualifications that they would want to apply to the meaning of consent. To start with consent has to be free and informed. So I ask: can a minor give free and informed consent? Who is a minor? Why should 18 be the age of consent? If a child is provided with information, will his/her consent to sex qualify as a sexual right? The debate on the age of consent and informed consent is indeed a vexed one, and the activity is not meant to make the participants arrive at a consensus on that. However, it does succeed to complicate the notion of consent for them. Moving on, I ask even if we can non-controversially agree that all adult, informed, consensual sexual acts are sexual rights, then would adultery and incest also be sexual rights? All hell breaks loose now and the discussion goes into the realm of marriage, commitment and faithfulness. Suddenly, all the principles of adult, informed, consent seem to have disappeared into this air! I end this exercise by listing a set of criminal laws in either category to establish how the law has criminalised almost all those acts that the group felt was sexual rights – like homosexuality, pre/extra-marital sex etc. – and does not criminalise acts like marital rape which completely goes against the principle of informed consent. The group of students who had joined a ‘sexuality’ workshop thinking of themselves as liberal and uninhibited are now challenged to rethink their own positions about sexual behaviour and identities.

IV. Foregrounding Liminal Sexuality

The activities discussed above have all taken place within confined classrooms in universities all across India. The need for a confined classroom was to instil a sense of privacy in the participants and all workshops always started with a pledge that every personal detail that might get discussed during the course of the workshop will remain confidential among the participants only.

¹² See generally, Mario D’Penha and Tarun, *Queering the Campus: Lessons from Indian Universities*, in Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (eds.) *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, New Delhi: Yoda Press, p. 205. 2005

Have the workshops then actually been ‘open spaces’? They were limited by physical boundaries, that of the classroom, and mental boundaries of privacy and inhibition. As I had pointed out in the first section, for me an ‘open space’ would mean one which has the potential to be liminal and that in turn would make its boundaries ever-expanding. Sexuality is one such issue that I feel has immense potential to disrupt the meta-narrative of progressive and liberal learning in university/college campuses. When ‘open spaces’ are constructed on the basis of ‘othering’ the not-so-open, or differently open it falls into the trap of essentialising the meaning of ‘openness’.

The disciplining agenda of institutional set-ups like the university need not be overhauled, but there is definitely a need to create spaces that do not feed into the disciplining agenda, but ones that can destabilise and subvert its massifying bio-power. To be liminal these ‘open spaces’ do not need to have agendas; they need not have a commonality in experiences of disadvantage – but what is paramount is the idea that those inhabiting the ‘open spaces’ negotiate the instability of identities, and at the same time challenge their fixedness.

Foregrounding liminal sexualities within ‘open spaces’ in universities would not just challenge the hydra heads of dominant heteronormativity, but would also make all of us part of the university confront our discomfort with difference: differences not just about questions of sexual variation, preferences and choice, but ones that include all ways in which we look at life and deal with our existential exigencies. An open, sexualised, liminal space will make us realise that we cannot privilege ‘sexual orientation’ as the most significant sexual difference among us, but also give it necessary importance. This space will make us challenge our own mental hierarchies that prefer certain kinds of ways-of-life, be it sexual or otherwise, to acquire legitimacy, and completely invisibilise the myriad, plural lifestyles that all of us live within and without our functional and performative spaces. That very moment we would have created our own ‘lower orders’.

Open Space is here to stay. And I have taken the quotation marks off to signify that it cannot afford to remain a space constructed on the basis of inbuilt hierarchies. It ought to be a space where identities do not get subsumed under the ‘bigger’ banner, yet the existence of the ‘bigger’ banner would depend on the marginal, but liminal identities; where you can protest against oppression, as well as powerfully and fearlessly articulate the beauty of pleasure and desire; where you do not have to ‘fit it’; where you will ‘belong’.

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