

The Politics of Penetration

Presented to the History of Alternate Sexualities Seminar, New Delhi, India, 1993 by Shivananda Khan

This was not presented as a written paper, but rather as a subject for discussion. The format was one of raising questions, expressing thoughts and concepts, generating ideas and challenges for participants to explore and think about.

HIV prevention programmes are being presented in the main through condom promotion, and can thus be seen at one level of social interaction as promoting penetrative sex either vaginal or anal.

The word “fore-play” appears to signify that the act of penetration itself is the “ultimate” sexual act and the centre of all sexual activity. Anything else must therefore eventually lead to this specific activity.

It is assumed that because vaginal penetration is a requirement for procreation, that women enjoy the act of penetration. Has any research been done to justify this assumption?

If the act of sexual penetration is seen as the “be all and end all” of sexual activity, then could it be that many men and women are conditioned to perform this act as their main sexual activity? If other options were equally promoted, would the level of penetration in terms of non-pro-creative sex change?

In the context of South Asia, the sexual act often has the following characteristics:

- a. In the dark
- b. Brief sexual contact in terms of the length of time for penetration and ejaculation
- c. Very little affectionate contact
- d. Lack of knowledge of each other’s bodies
- e. No effective privacy
- f. A significant percentage of non-circumcised men cannot use condoms
- g. A significant percentage of men do not know how to use condoms anyway
- h. A significant percentage of men have pre-marital and extra marital sex
- i. A significant percentage of men believe that sex with a wife is for children only
- j. A significant percentage of men whether married or not tend towards being indiscriminate about the gender of the sexual partner. That is they will have sex with other men/boys as well as with women. There is enough anecdotal evidence to indicate that the actual act of sexual penetration, whether anally or vaginally is quite brutal in that very often tissue tearing occurs. Not enough time is given for the woman to generate her own lubrication to ease vaginal penetration, and anal penetration requires self-administered lubrication for ease of penetration. Water-based lubricant is not readily available, and where it is it is quite expensive, and even if it was available, when can it be used in the above contexts?

Non-penetrative sex, or anal sex, is not seen as “real sex”, and where it is known that it is practiced, the receptive partner is often defined as “less than a man.

Sexual penetration then can be seen as part of being a man and where it is the sole form of sexual expression, which is given any validity, it becomes a social expression as well.

In this sense sexual penetration can be seen as part of the expression of a phallo-centric culture.

The language of sexual penetration is filled with terms that indicate degrees of violence and power.

Male sexuality and sexual expression is specifically constructed around penetration.

Definitions of malehood and masculinity are constructed around the penetrator and the penetrated.

It is the penetrator who is seen as the man.

The penetrated is one who is seen as not-man -a woman, passive, female, feminine.

The language of penetration is used in other arenas that also express levels of social and political violence. It means to dominate, to take over, to control, to have power over, to be possessed.

Penetration then can become an act of violation.

Even forms of alternate sexualities express these constructions of penetration.

The way homosexual behaviour is defined, the confusion from many men and women as to “what lesbians do?”, of the way *hijras* are defined.

Because of the way cultures have developed phallo-centric, patriarchal, male dominated structures, penetration as the active principle is a predominate symbol of such cultures. In this way the act of sexual penetration becomes the central focus of all sexual activity and manhood. Sexual penetration is given supreme validity.

Other forms of sexual activity that do not involve penetration, whether anal or vaginal should be given equal social validity.

That in terms of sexual health of women and men, not only should there be condom promotion, but equally, non-penetrative (very often safer) forms of sex should be also promoted.

Non-penetrative sexual activities should be seen as alternates of penetrative sex, rather than just “fore-play”.

The centrality of the act of sexual penetration can be linked to the centrality of concepts compulsory heterosexuality and pro-creative sex. The act of “baby-making” as the only legitimate form of sex forces us to see all sex as penetrative. This is then transferred to anal sex, whether between men and women, and between men and men.

Does talking about and enacting penetrative sex means becoming involved within psycho-social dynamics of masculine dominance?

This raised the issue of whether the act of sexual penetration whether anally or vaginally may be enjoyable to both partners. But the language of penetration carries with it these hidden agendas of masculine power over others, of patriarchal social structures and of conflating sexual activity within dynamics of compulsory heterosexuality within the confines of male dominance. It would be useful to construct a different language around sexual pleasure and penetration so as to avoid this conflation.

It is suggested that an alternative term for penetration, which would reflect the issues of mutual pleasure, non-penetration, and such like would be the word “receptive”.

Thus we would have “receptive sex” which disempowers the whole psychosocial concepts of “penetration” and enables a construction of “loving acceptance” in the sexual act, rather than the act of penetration.

What was interesting in the group dynamics of the discussion was the relation of the women and the men to the issues.

To deny that the act of penetration was enjoyable was to deny the malehood of men and the sexual power they enjoy over women and/or other men.

Specific research needs to be done on sexual behaviours in terms of pleasure and choices of sexual acts.

This research should also include data about anal and vaginal walls being torn in the act of penetration, and an analysis of these levels in terms of HIV and STI infections.

More research needs to be done particularly on the relation to choices of a particular sexual act and the personal psychological profiles of participants.

Historical work being done in South Asia regarding sexual activity indicates that there have been periods where non-penetrative sex was seen as socially valid and that penetration was only within the confines of “baby-making”. These histories need to be made visible.

And finally research should be done in terms of those men and women who do not practice penetrative sex, but only practice other forms of sexual activity. Why? And what?