

The No-Touch Taboos: An Understanding of Sexuality and Gender in the Indian Context

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Abstract

The sensation of touch and the need for physical contact are fundamental in the development of human behaviour. As an intimate medium of communication, tactile interactions between men and women can make their social bonds more profound. But there are both “contact” and “no contact” societies that differ in their attitude towards tactile communications. While “contact” cultures are largely touchy-feely communities, “no contact” cultures like India problematise touch between opposite genders due to reasons related to the caste system, fear of sexual vulgarity, subversion of gender roles, and so forth. On close observation we find that all these reasons are interconnected and interdependent. With its prime focus on the “no-touch taboo” among opposite genders in India, this paper explores the underlying role of sexuality, patriarchy and conventional gender roles in perpetuating the established social structure in India. A deeper understanding of these mechanisms reveals that, in India, a touch-averse culture is essential in the preservation of its systems of power.

Keywords: taboo, touch, sexuality, obscenity, disciplining, power, gender roles

Introduction

Touch is one of the five senses of human body and a powerful medium of interaction between human beings. From anger to love, touch communicates human emotions perhaps more effectively than words. In his book titled *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (1978), British-American anthropologist Ashley Montagu analyses how tactile experiences, or their lack, affects the development of behaviour and explores what he calls “the mind of the skin.” According to him, touch is the “mother of all senses”:

Touch is the earliest sensory system to become functional in all species thus far studied, human, animal, and bird. Perhaps, next to the brain, the skin is the most important of all our organ systems. The sense most closely associated with the skin, the sense of touch, is the earliest to develop in the human embryo” (Montagu, 1978, pp.1–2).

We physically experience the world around us through our skin. The external environment gives continuous stimulation to the skin and the skin, in turn, gives sensory feedback to the brain. This feedback from skin to brain is operational even during sleep. We can live without senses like sight, but not without the sense of touch.

Both humans and animals use their sense of touch to create deep familial, social and emotional bonds. In her work *Skin, a Natural History* (2006), American anthropologist Nina Jablonski calls attention to how the significance of touch is reflected in our language and daily affairs. We use phrases like “I am touched” or “how touching”, and so on, to show that we “feel” about things. Montagu too shows how the feel of a thing is important to us. We talk of persons having a “soft” or “happy” touch. We tell our close ones to “keep in touch”. Some are “thin-skinned” for us while others “thick-skinned”. “Through ‘feeling’ we frequently refer to emotional states, such as happiness, joy, sadness, melancholy, and depression, and by that term often imply a reference to touching” (Montagu, 1978, p. 6).

The lack of touch also affects our conduct and demeanour. Jablonski notes that touch deprivation in newborns, including human infants, can result in behavioural inadequacies: “Infants deprived of reassuring contact with their mothers after birth and in early infancy suffer biological and psychological stress that has ramifications throughout their lives” (Jablonski, 2006, p.152). She goes on to state that in studies conducted among primates, it was found that, like massage, “grooming” reduced the “stress hormones” of both the grooming and the groomed. At the same time the lack of touch resulted in increased stress hormones. Another interesting fact found was that primates used touch to resolve conflicts among them and that this strengthened their social bonding. Regarding human infants, mothers, caregivers and midwives undoubtedly agree that infants who are touched more are both calmer and sounder sleepers. It is also understood that “depressed mothers who regularly massage their babies lessen their own depression” (Jablonski, 2006, p. 154). Thus to put it simply, touch as a physical sense has got a significant role in our biological and social exchanges, which equally facilitate the formation of our social selves and our close interactions with others.

To touch is to erase the distance or the “space” in between. That is, touch brings people together. But as much as touch is necessary and good for physical and emotional wellbeing, it can be equally abusive and physically coercive. There may be nothing more detestable than an undesirable, unwanted touch. Thus, a touch can be good or bad depending on its intention. As a medium of communication, people touch each other differently in different cultures. At the same time not all societies encourage communication through touch. Stella Ting-Toomey’s

book *Communicating across Cultures* (1999), analyses touch behaviours in different cultures. She identifies five communicative functions of touch: “1) ritualistic interaction such as shaking hands or bowing; 2) expressing affect such as kissing and kicking; 3) Playfulness such as flirtatious stroking and poking; 4) a control function such as grabbing someone’s arm; and 5) a task-related function such as a nurse taking a patient’s pulse at the wrist” (p.130). As she states, all these interactions differ in varying degrees according to cultural values, conventions and practices in different cultures. For example, hand shaking or hugging as a way of greeting came to India from the west. Before the arrival of the British, Indians used to put their palms together and say *namaste* to welcome others. Today, even though they use both practices, the former has gained a considerable popularity over the latter.

Expressing passionate emotions through touch also depends on the cultural and moral circumstances of different societies. While western societies are more open to hugging, kissing, and so forth, in public, India still frowns upon it. The cultural values of the country are considered to be at stake when affections are displayed publically. There are other factors like the context of a touch, the gender and age of the people involved etc, which also alter the way a touch is perceived. When it comes to the context of a touch, there are certain people who can engage in certain kinds of touch in specific contexts. For example, a doctor touching one’s private body parts as part of a medical examination is not considered offensive (unless it is abusive). Communication through touch is monitored the most when it comes to the matter of gender. Taking into account the gender of the people involved, different cultures practice different touch patterns. Each society has its own expectations on who should touch whom, and how much, in diverse interactions.

While Chinese view opposite-sex handshakes as acceptable, Malays and Arabs view contact by opposite-sex handshakes as taboo. Furthermore, different cultures uphold different gender norms for embracing and handholding. The friendly full embrace between males is much more acceptable in many Latin American cultures than in Britain or the United States. Likewise, the friendly arm link pattern between two males in Arab and Latin American cultures is a commonplace practice. The friendly handholding pattern between two females in many Asian cultures is also common nonverbal practice. (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p.130)

Comparative studies conducted on touch behaviours in Latin American, U.S and Canadian cultures show that Latin Americans engage in more touch communication than U.S Americans and Canadians (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 131). But both Arab and Latin American societies prefer same-sex touch communication over opposite sex interaction. Nina Jablonski (2006) too notes that modern American culture is highly touch-averse in social settings like schools, hospitals and workplaces. The situation is even worse in many Asian cultures where open displays of affection– from a friendly hug to a passionate kiss – are thought to be abominable and viewed with contempt. Thus, in different cultures the “standards of permissible and desirable touching, both in public and in private, can vary widely” (p. 157).

Beyond its physicality an act of touch may have different cultural meanings as well. A recent touch that became a subject of talk all around the world was the handshake between American President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, kicking off the nuclear summit of 2018 in Singapore. This touch was celebrated as the “historic handshake” of the century. It symbolized the end of an age-old rivalry between two countries.

Sometimes not just touch but also its denial sends social signals or has cultural meanings inscribed in it. Take the example of India. Being the breeding ground of one of world’s oldest

religions and cultures, India is a land of many cultural taboos. The anchor of the Hindu religion is the social hierarchy it builds on the basis of its “caste” division. This social hierarchy is the source of the many taboos that India maintains to this day. “Untouchability” is the brutal practice of naming lower caste people as untouchables and denying them the privileges of normal life, including that of “touch”. That is, no lower caste people are allowed to touch upper caste people because their touch is considered to be polluting. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation, violence and discrimination of other types as well. Here, denying touch to the lower caste serves to ensure the “purity” of the upper caste. Thus the practice of untouchability carries the cultural implication that certain castes are superior and naturally dominant over certain other castes, and these two shall never come into contact with each other. Additionally, “Untouchability, like racism in the Western world, has served to rationalize and maintain a vast pool of cheap labour” (Joshi, 1983, para. 7).

Apart from caste, gender categorization is the other driving force behind India’s touch-averse culture. Any kind of a touch between a man and a woman in public is dreaded in India. This “no touch” practice between opposite genders in turn increases the possibility of gender segregation as well. Co-educational institutions are the ideal agencies of power where this practice is fully enforced. The fright arises out of two things mainly. One is the fear of “sexual explicitness”, which began to be equated with “obscenity” in India after exposure to Victorian morality, and the other is the deep rooted “caste sensibility” Indian society upholds.

Let’s look at how ideas of Victorian morality have altered the way the touch between a man and woman was perceived in India. Ann M.C Gagne, in her doctoral thesis titled *Touching Bodies/Bodies Touching: The Ethics of Touch in Victorian Literature (1860-1900)*, submitted to the University of Western Ontario, analyses how touch between opposite sexes was perceived in 19th century etiquette books and contact manuals in Britain. According to her, these texts designed the proper decorum for all kinds of interactions. One of these, Count Alfred D’Orsay’s book *Etiquette; or, a Guide to the Usages of Society* (1843) states: “Etiquette is the barrier which society draws around itself as a protection against offences the “law” cannot touch— it is a shield against the intrusion of the impertinent, the improper and the vulgar” (Gagne, 1860-1900, p. 12). Thus etiquette functioned as moral code and reinforced propriety in 19th century Britain. D’Orsay says that during a waltz performance, a man’s touch on a woman should not be a clasp or tight hold but a light one. His comment on handshake is even more interesting: “one must —never, indeed, offer your hand, unless well assured that it is in a presentable state of frigidity; for the touch of a tepid hand chills the warmest feelings” (Gagne, 1860-1900, p. 13).

Another manual by Oliver Bunce titled *Don't: A Manual of Mistakes and Impropriety More Or Less Prevalent in Conduct and Speech* (1884) says that touch should not have a place in social interactions. “Don’t touch people when you have occasion to address them—says Bunce—, catching people by the arms or the shoulders, or nudging them to attract their attention is a violation of good breeding” (Gagne, 1860-1900, p. 13). These instructions and codes gained access over the social life of 19th century England and tactile interactions between opposite sexes began to be questioned on the grounds of their ethicality and morality. When along with the British these ideologies came to India, they were assimilated into Indian culture as well. Thereafter, tactile interactions between opposite sexes became a symbol of sexual explicitness in India, which made it a subject of surveillance. This system of surveillance is at its worst in co-educational institutions, a practice that may prevent children from having healthy social relationships with each other.

When it comes to caste sensibility, the system makes use of disciplinary laws and rules in order to ensure that no intimate interaction that could subvert the heredity of the caste system will survive. It takes special interest to ensure “distance” between men and women so that they do not develop “wrong types” of close bonds with each other. What is this wrong type? All relations that transgress the boundaries of caste are wrong and pose a threat to the system. In such a cultural backdrop, what else can be a suitable agency other than co-educational institutions to enforce a non-tactile culture? And thus our co-educational schools make separate seating arrangements for girls and boys, ensure at all cost that a particular “gap” is maintained between opposite genders and impose a strict system of surveillance in the name of discipline to check whether they violate the norms.

At the same time, when we talk about the “permitted” and the “forbidden” in different cultures, we must not forget the influence each culture has over other cultures. The digital revolution that shook the world in the latter half of twentieth century ushered in the ‘information age’. Computers, information networks and Internet connectivity paved the way for global information exchange and became platforms of “digital acculturation”. There is no doubt about the fact that exposure to varied cultural practices, habits, customs and traditions has influenced the younger generation of the twentieth century to a great extent. This has altered their thought processes, perceptions and ways of interactions as well.

Some two or three decades ago, neither adults nor adolescents in India would have dared to openly hug or kiss a person of opposite gender in public. But today with the spread of social media and the exposure to western cultures, our young generation has become more open about their relationships and the displays of affection. In the year 2014, a non-violent protest against moral policing, called “The Kiss of Love” was organized at Kerala’s Kochi, where the protesters organized a public event to openly kiss each other. The event got support from educational institutions outside Kerala, including universities. Following this, similar protests were organized by youngsters in other parts of the country. In another recent incident where a couple was beaten up for standing too close in the Kolkata metro, a group of youngsters organized a “free hug” campaign in protest. Youngsters protest because they identify the system and its ways as power that controls their agency. Thus when authoritative institutions like schools address the changes that have happened in the public behaviour of our youngsters, their exposure to modern media culture and its assimilation should also be taken into account.

Touch: Sexuality and Law in the Indian Context

The word “obscene” in today’s general understanding pertains to “the portrayal or description of sexual matters, offensive or disgusting by accepted standards of morality and decency” (“Obscene”, n.d.). Thus literally everything sexual is obscene and therefore immoral by nature. But where does this idea of obscenity originate? The Victorian age with its harsh stand on moral values and ethics is identified as the significant contributor to this anathema against sexuality. In 1868, the British court held the view that obscene materials carry a tendency to corrupt those people who have an inclination towards such immoral ideas. Thereafter works of obscene literature were branded in this manner by taking into account the negative influence it might have on people. This perception later became the basis of anti-obscenity laws in the legal systems of all those countries that were once part of the British Empire, including India. But over a period of time, the cultural understanding of obscenity has also altered.

The advent of the Internet and technology in the 20th century has enabled anyone with a computer or even a smart phone to view sexually explicit texts, photos or videos from any

source. This has resulted in the identification of obscenity with “pornography” in modern times. However, from “written texts” to “visual media”, obscenity is equated with sexually explicit content. Like beauty, sexuality too is in the eyes of the beholder. But what often happens is that the system enforces its idea of sexuality over its subjects. In today’s India two people hugging, kissing or even walking and sitting together is considered to be against the “cultural heritage” of the country. Therefore, every intimate interaction between two people is treated as obscene and injected into the minds of citizens through agents like schools, laws, and so forth. The nation’s idea of “obscenity” is engraved in section 292 of the Indian Penal Code:

A book, pamphlet, paper, writing, drawing, painting, representation, figure or any other object, shall be deemed to be obscene if it is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or if its effect... tend to deprave and corrupt person, who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it. (Sec.292 (1) (2))

Thus obscenity is grounded upon “sexuality”, and the law penalises it based on its “corruptive content”. What often happens is that the two are conflated, such that whatever is sexual becomes corruptive, offensive and obscene. Sexuality is thought to work against the moral principles and ethics on which the nation is built. As a law, the definition of obscenity is hazy. It should explain, specify and contextualize the different aspects of “sexuality” it penalises. Otherwise, this very vagueness creates loopholes whereby the chance of misinterpreting and misusing the law is strong. Until and unless the state clears its stand on sexual obscenity, even “non-sexual” relations are vulnerable to the threat of punishment.

Disciplining: Control of Agency

Educational institutions generally follow certain codes of conduct in order to ensure “discipline”, codes which, if disobeyed, make the wrongdoer answerable to the law. Now what is our idea of discipline? Schools have specific time and space arrangements to maintain order and ensure a disciplined environment; this always means that its conception of time and space is imposed on the students. So basically discipline is the control of agency. In his book *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (1975), French philosopher and theoretician Michel Foucault traces the history of the western penal system from public executions to discipline-oriented prisons based on historical documents from France. Torture, the corporal punishment aimed at the “body” paved way to imprisonment and confinement intended to correct the “soul” during eighteenth century. But the “body” then became an intermediary that got caught in a “system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions” (Foucault, 1975, p. 19).

The classical age identified the human body as object and target of power. Power that could manipulate, train and shape a body according to its needs. The idea of “control” became a matter of interest in penal procedure, providing the law with “an infinitesimal power over the active body” (Foucault, 1975, p. 137). As Foucault explains, the law imposed compulsion over gestures, movements and actions of the active body. “These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called disciplines” (Foucault, 1975, p.137). Thus discipline enabled modern institutions like prisons, factories and even schools to individualize bodies in order to train and manipulate them according to their requirements:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. (p.138)

According to Foucault, the secondary schools were a site of this political economy from an early period. Later it spread to primary schools and slowly into hospitals and military organizations during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. But how does discipline function? Discipline acts its best in enclosed places. But more than enclosure, partitioning is what defines the discipline machinery. “Each individual has his own place; and each place its individual” (Foucault, 1975, p. 143). Partition marks off the subjects within a place so that the individuated bodies can be used, subjected and transformed. Thus attributing specific spaces to individuals are a way of taming them. This space partition can be physical as well as cultural. In their physical sense cellular prisons, monasteries and schools are enclosed spaces that made it possible to locate individuals, monitor their ways, evaluate and judge their merits. Assigning different spaces for girls and boys and regulating them on the basis of a prejudiced hierarchy is an example of cultural partitioning. “In organizing “cells”, “places” and “ranks”, the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical” (Foucault, 1975, p. 148).

To put it simply, disciplining is supervising and to be disciplined is equal to being constantly watched. This disciplinary system that spread in the West came to India with the arrival of the British. The numerous hospitals and schools they established in India followed the same practice and this discipline machinery remained even after the British left. Disciplining has evolved into a fully-fledged “mechanics of power” today. Apparently, it is the duty of the schools’ disciplinary machinery to ensure that “order” is not interrupted. What is order? Order represents and reflects power. And what are the characteristics of power? Power is patriarchal, morally conservative and sexually intolerant. Thus discipline ensures the creation of docile bodies upon which “power” can enact its codes of conduct; knowingly or unknowingly our educational institutions become devices for the enactment of power. If the individuated bodies that are made docile attempt to come out of their passive state, then it shows the inefficiency of the disciplinary apparatus, resulting in the loss of reputation and reliability for those devices of power. It is no wonder that authority has made individuals internalize that discipline (in the way the system requires it). The system attributes an organic nature to the discipline it demands, that is to say, it needs docile bodies to believe that the disciplined activities “expected” of them are “natural” to them. Over a period of time, this “force” that maintains a precise system of command – “the order” – will make discipline a norm.

That order does not need to be explained or formulated; it must trigger the required behaviour and that is enough. From the master of discipline to him who is subjected to it the relation is one of signalization: it is a question not of understanding the injunction but of perceiving the signal and reacting to it immediately, according to a more or less artificial, prearranged code. (Foucault, 1975, p. 166)

An attempt to break away from the established disciplinary codes is equally a subversion of the system. It is said that education aims at the all-round progress of children. Evidently, this all-round progress includes emotional and mental health in addition to intellectual growth. Children spend more time of their growing years in school than with their families. The

proximity of peer groups, the bond and camaraderie they share with friends and teachers in schools, their respective age, and the academic and non academic atmosphere of the school all influence the mental formation of a child. Therefore, it is a must that the teachers, especially those who teach the adolescents, should have a proper understanding of what adolescent boys and girls go through in coping with the physical and mental changes that they experience.

School authorities enforce moral and disciplinary codes without giving a second look at the instinctual attraction that an adolescent pupil naturally experience. In an attempt to nullify anything called “adolescent sexuality”, schools’ moral codes include separate seating for girls and boys, no public display of affection, no touch, no talk and the like. Thus teachers will take up the role of “moral guardians” and students always become subjects of surveillance. This entire endeavour has harmful impact on the students. They find this natural change they undergo as something “unacceptable” in the society in which they live, making them feel like “offenders”. This equally crushes their sense of self, individuality and self-confidence.

Foucault identifies four characteristics of discipline that ensures its place in the society. It is cellular (through a play of spatial distribution), organic (through coded activities), genetic (through an accumulation over time) and it is combinatory (by the composition of forces). Accordingly, discipline obtains its combinatory forces from Tactics – “Tactics, the art of constructing, with located bodies, coded activities and trained aptitudes, mechanisms in which the product of the various forces is increased by their calculated combination are no doubt the highest form of disciplinary practice” (Foucault, 1975, p. 167). Put simply, the system functions through tactful disciplinary measures called “norms” through which it produces individuated, docile bodies that are expected to have the same attitude, thought processes and viewpoints as those promoted by the system.

Addressing the subject of punishment during the classical age, Foucault notes that though judgments passed on crimes and offences are defined by a juridical code, “Judgments are also passed on the passions, instincts, anomalies, infirmities, maladjustments, effect of environment or heredity” (Foucault, 1975, p. 25). They are assessed as “attenuating circumstances” which include knowledge of the criminal, one’s estimation of him, what is known about the relations between him, his past and his crime, what might be expected of him in the future, etc. Being the agents of power over a period of time, schools and other institutions establish themselves as the holders of power. Thus they evolve to become parallel judiciaries of a sort. But when the real judiciary itself fails to define what it means, like the vague definition of obscenity in the Indian Penal Code, these parallel judiciaries frame their own mechanisms of punishment and use them at their own discretion.

Family, Gender and Social Order: A Feminist Perspective

We already saw how, in the name of order and discipline, the system has been taming individuals to suit its requirements. Apparently, the existence and maintenance of the gendered binaries are a necessity for the system to survive. What particular characteristic of the system fears the subversion of its ideals? Feminist writer Nivedita Menon, in her book *Seeing like a Feminist* (2012), attempts to read gender and sex in the social context of India with a feminist perspective. Social order, according to her, is like nude make up. We spend time painting our face to make it look natural, like we haven’t done anything. Similarly, the maintenance of social order requires uninterrupted repetition of established practices, so much so that it should appear unquestionably natural and inherent. She completely agrees with Judith Butler in saying that there are complex networks of cultural production involved in the construction,

identification and assimilation of gendered identities of “man” and “woman”. In her opinion, “a feminist perspective recognizes that the hierarchical organizing of the world around gender is the key to maintaining social order; that to live lives marked ‘male’ and ‘female’ is to live different realities.” (Menon, 2012, p. viii)

According to her, the soul of this social order is in the “institution of marriage”, which is identified to be the backbone of the Indian society that has to reinforce its casteist and sexist ideologies. Family, being the anchor of the social order, is an institution rooted in an inequality that follows clearly established hierarchies of gender. In this configuration, men are superior to women. “The question of gender- appropriate behaviour is thus inextricably linked to legitimate procreative sexuality” (Menon, 2012, p. 4). This setup anchors the patriarchal social order and the social order demands the family be so structured. Thus, family too becomes an agent of power that cannot defy the system by itself. In fact, like schools, the family ensures that “men and women who do not conform to these characteristics are continuously disciplined into the appropriate behaviour” (Menon, 2012, p. 62).

In this backdrop, the question to be asked is how long has sex/gender been the basis of social differentiation? And have all societies at all times followed this separation? Nigerian scholar Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997) argues that it was the advent of modernity in the west that resulted in a patriarchal culture, which made gender difference a crucial distinction in society. Many of the pre-colonial African countries lacked such a categorization (p. 15). Similarly, Native American culture considered hermaphrodites as having ‘two spirits’ and saw them as blessed because they possessed spirits of both man and woman (Smithers, 2014, pp. 1–2). Until the mid-nineteenth century, there was considerable fluidity in gender identification, but colonial modernity began policing it afterwards.

Until the middle of the twentieth century in the West, for instance, pink was the colour for boys and blue for girls! In the 1800s, most infants were dressed in white, and gender differences weren’t highlighted until well after they were able to walk. At that point of time in the West, was considered to be more important to distinguish children from adults than boys from girls. But when the interest in differentiating between boys and girls emerged in the early twentieth century, the colour associated with boys was pink, and it was blue for girls. (Menon, 2012, pp. 62–63)

The above instances reveal gender identities as constructs of society. They have been changing in accordance with societal changes and can be altered for society’s general good. But in Nivedita’s opinion the patriarchal family setup survives on gender hierarchies and this can only be achieved by a cultural reinforcement of the biological difference between the two genders. Thus gender segregation or differentiation somehow becomes a necessity for the survival of the family setup and the patriarchal ideologies it nurtures. In the light of the subject under study, let’s look at how schools as social institutions achieve this aim.

Gender Stereotyping in Classrooms

Schools play a major role in the identity formation of children rather than families. Imagine a co-education kindergarten with a group of girls and boys of same age brought together for the first time as a class. Given that they have already been trained in the conventional boy/girl stereotype by their families, it is obvious that they will distinguish each other on the basis of what they have seen and learned. Since their understanding of the other gender is pre-set, their identification of one another will no doubt be characterized by the “differences” they have.

What happens here is that children will connect the differences in expected behaviours of the two genders with the physical or anatomical differences they now spot in others of their same age and incorrectly assume that gender roles are inherently related to sex.

Now, what if the schools also follow the policy of separate seating arrangements for boys and girls? The partition at the centre that marks a fixed distance between girls and boys is not a mere division. As far as a young child is concerned, it is an official confirmation of the “differences” between gendered identities that has been habitually taught as natural. The strict adherence to this segregation by authorities makes the child believe that, indeed, genders are and should be differentiated because the gendered essences are fixed, rigid and unchangeable. What will become of these children when they become adults? What else can we expect them to be, other than conventional “sexists”? This practice of gender segregation in co-ed schools actually takes away the possibility of a childhood experience that could have been more inclusive and productive. By denying their right to a more vibrant childhood, these schools also nurture a “hate culture” among children of different genders. At some point, every girl or boy in a co-education school go through the “we hate girls/boys phase”.

It is possible that educational institutions risk the psychological and emotional health of the children under their care. All through their schooling years, they are expected to keep away from the other gender. By the time this practice manifests as the “hatred phase”, children would have framed “pre-set” notions about the other on the basis of the visibly separated sexed bodies. On passing this phase and reaching adolescence, underlying all their natural and instinctual desires would be the very same conventional misconceptions regarding the other gender. Nothing really does change when they become adults.

From the previous analyses we can deduce that when children of different biological gender are allowed to mingle right from kindergarten, when they are allowed to play, talk and eat together, slowly through the growing years they will realize that all those conventional gender roles, that the stereotypical identities the system prescribed and enforced, are not fixed but fluid. Only when they find out that there are “girls who love soccer” and “boys who love cooking”, they can understand that it is normal to diverge from conventions. Above all they will see that these “gendered identities” are nothing but social constructions and one’s anatomy as a girl or boy has got nothing to do with his/her behaviours. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler states “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free floating artifice, with the consequence that “man” and “masculine” might just as easily signify a female body as well as a male one, and “woman” and “feminine” a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler, 1990, p.9). When girls and boys interact closely and share a strong emotional bond right from their young days, there will be no need to draft “vigilante circulars” to check on them because the stronger the bond, the less may be the chances of abuse.

Conclusion

If we are to make the future citizens of the country physically and emotionally healthy beings, then it is high time that we change existing conventions and taboos regarding gender. Schools are considered to be the place where identities are made. If it’s so, then it should be the place where identities are unmade as well. To build a physically strong and emotionally healthy younger generation, we need to foster a culture of healthy and positive touch in our families and schools. With the increased threat of “sexual abuse” always lurking behind our children, it is a must that they should be made aware of “good” and “bad” touch. When an adolescent girl

and boy interact with each other with proper understanding of one's sexuality and accept it as natural, the fear of the "erotic" will fade and they will start sharing a deep, strong and close companionship and camaraderie. The physical interactions within this bond will obviously be much healthier, which will equally help them to identify even the slightest possibility of a "wrong touch" advanced towards them outside their circle. The moment "sexuality" ceases to be a taboo, our vision will be clear enough to acknowledge non-sexual, platonic relations that are nothing but a sublime form of "love". It is time to help them unlearn so many of the wrong notions fed into young minds. Let them touch. Let them talk. Let them play, eat and fight together. And without any pre-set notions, let them "find" each other.

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