

The “Kiss and Love” Movement: The Murmur of Indian Protest

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Global Research, November 12, 2014

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#)

“Right to love is our democratic right.” – University student chants, Kolkata, Reuters, Nov 10, 2014

The talk about India’s still freshly elected Narendra Modi is that of a man placing India on a high accelerating motor for growth and progress. The first is economically contentious, but the second is almost entirely immeasurable. Nonetheless, the modus operandi is clear: Modi is determined to transform India, insisting on change even as he insists on recovering motifs of the past.

The great contradiction of the Indian political mindset has been that tension between the holy memory of a glorious past obscured by colonial rule, and the present that seemingly fights it as a “work in progress”. Cultural identity, forged through a certain cultural consciousness, provides the holding glue – in Modi’s case, that of Hinduness or Hindutva. As was noted by Vinod K. Jose in *The Caravan* a few years ago, Modi, in 2001, was unimpressed during the time of the BJP Chief Minister’s running of Gujarat state. He had one glaring fault – he was “interested only in development, but not advancing the stated goals of Hindutva.”[1]

Like all identity politics, such all-enveloping labels risk becoming a deluding caricature, a distortion that serves to undermine rather than hold, the communities in question. Packaging India is a doomed exercise, however good the public relations wizards might be. Such labels, in other words, are dangerous in the face of diversity. Behind the face of *Vikaas Purush* – Modi’s own self-titling as Development Man – lies a more homogenising, unifying concept of Hindu Man.

Bubbling anxiety against this drive, abiding concern of these tensions, has found form in a “love” movement against straightjacket morality – notably that marshalled against flesh and affection. The “Kiss and Love” protest has started to murmur its way across India’s political geography from Kochi, even as analysts decide on whether it is worth a scribble at all. News outlets such as Reuters suggest that something big is in the offing.

“A mass-kissing campaign against moral policing in a city in Kerala has swept the country, advertised via Facebook, as urban youngsters challenge a deeply conservative society.”[2]

That Reuters deemed it a “mass-kissing” campaign was exaggerated – dozens of activists stealing kisses and blocking traffic at a New Delhi metro station hardly counts as massive in any constructive sense. A 100 university students marching in Kolkata can hardly be deemed to be a revolutionary, wall-tearing throng. And having 110,000 likes on a Facebook

“Kiss of Love” community page is hardly indicative of anything more than enthusiastic clicking. The jury is very much out on the effect of the movement, even as it throbs with calculated affection.

Organisers such as Pahkhuri Zaheer of Jawaharlal Nehru University’s department of women’s studies certainly make up for the lack of numbers with a firm enthusiasm. She sees this form of “kissing” resistance as a powerful medium. The lips have the answer. She does, however, insist that, “It’s not about just kissing. It’s about ... inter-caste marriages, inter-religious marriages, live-in relationships.”

Its flames tend to be fanned by a particular demographic. As expected, it is taking root among the campuses, and among the urban young. The groups participating here are suggestive of that trend – the All India Students’ Association (AISA), the All India Students’ Federation (AISF) and the Students Federation of India (SFI). But such groups would not necessarily be representative. Many of the young voters did find Modi’s electoral message convincing. A thriving, good economy does not necessarily get the moral police off one’s back. In fact, the converse is often true.

The fashionable target in this battle of passion is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) grouping, the Hindu nationalist organisation created in the 1920s to forge a Hindu nationalist agenda. Modi counts as one of its most prominent members. “Kiss of Love” activists have been busying themselves protesting outside the Delhi RSS office. The RSS, in turn, has organised its own counter-protests, finding in the “Kiss of Love” movement a troubling, foreign influence invasive with its Western mores.

Hindu Sena, a group very much in the business of monitoring the Indian moral pulse, have taken to threatening the Kiss of Love protesters with mass rape. Kissing public was the equivalent of a naked walk in public. “What should be promoted,” claimed Hindu Sena member Vishnu Gupta, “is Indian culture. Kama Sutra isn’t what they think.”[3] A spokesman for Vishwa Hindu Parishad, an BJP-affiliated party, has similarly claimed that, “Our Indian culture does not permit us displaying such kinds of affection in public spaces.”

Eroticised cultures are, paradoxically, very controlled. Sex and affection are circumscribed even as they are detailed in controlled, cultural contexts. Displaying them in ancient sculpture, prints and texts suggests, not a free and open approach to a feeling, but a carefully manufactured presence. Behave accordingly.

When sex is used, it can be a political or social weapon, a vengeful tool that sees lower caste women raped by upper caste individuals, or Dalit men hacked to death for falling in love with a woman of another caste. Such forms of vigilante policing – the sort of policing that keeps body and uterus in their firmly allocated places – have been exposed by a growing number of activists against the rigidity of gender roles. In Anisha Nair’s words of simmering anger, “Publically raping is ‘Indian culture’ but kissing an expression love is disgusting.”[4]

The protests, in attempting to bring those erotic sculptures of India’s past to life, may themselves ossify, or disappear, in time. The battle here is very much against not merely the inter-caste morality system, but a cultural system that controls public spaces. Appearances are everything. But some of the youth are fractious, and they are speaking – and kissing.

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Notes

- [1] <http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/emperor-uncrowned>
- [2] <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/11/10/india-kissing-idINKCN0IU1QB20141110>
- [3] <http://news.oneindia.in/new-delhi/kiss-love-moral-police-rape-threat-new-delhi-india--culture-1556410.html>
- [4] <http://news.oneindia.in/new-delhi/kiss-love-moral-police-rape-threat-new-delhi-india--culture-1556410.html>

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