

The Case of Boro Chupria's Tomboy

Sunday 11 March 2007, by [BHATTACHARYA Chandrima S.](#), [KHAITAN Tarunabh](#), [MENON Nivedita](#), [MUKHERJI Chandrasekhar](#)
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Chandrima S. Bhattacharya meets the girl who was publicly stripped, beaten and photographed in a Bengal village for being "like a boy".

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Boro Chupria is a small village about 25 km from Krishnagar. It is a pretty village, with its huts of mud, brick and darma, and its grounds are clean. Things look peaceful - and unspoilt. There are no blatant signs of the world outside: only a large haath chhap, the Congress symbol, is drawn on the outside of a hut. Yet this prosperous jute-producing village sends a large section of its men to the Gulf countries.

On December 25, newspapers had reported an incident concerning a young woman from Boro Chupria. She was dragged to Gyanrapota, the village across the main road, stripped, beaten, tonsured and photographed naked because she behaved "like a boy". The reports suggested that the villagers thought of her as a lesbian. But since spoken Bengali has no equivalent for the English word - samakami not being used in everyday speech - being "like a boy" was perhaps the phrase being used to denote lesbianism.

Mamata Biswas (name changed) was beaten up for allegedly "preying on" another young, but married, girl, who lived in a nearby village. Mamata lived in a run-down brick hut, which stood out from the rest of the houses. As we, a team of reporters, approached her house a week after the incident, an assertive woman in her late 30s came out. She was Mamata's mother. Mamata, a small, thin girl, dark and very hirsute, with a tonsured head, came out too. She looked stunned by what had happened. She was wearing just a kurta without the salwar. Her mother said she was 16, but she looked about 12. She looked like a boy in girls' clothes, and stood stiffly, with her head bowed. But her jaws were set when she looked up.

She spoke with deliberation.

She said that five days ago, on December 22, Ramakrishna Moitra, a resident of Gyanrapota village, descended on her house and forcibly took her to his house in Gyanrapota. There he, his mother-in-law Kusum and another person called Tarak beat her, tonsured her, stripped her and then photographed her naked, to show the world that biologically "she was not a girl". Tarak, the alleged photographer, did not develop the film, presumably because he was disappointed. Next day, Ramakrishna was arrested after Mamata's mother lodged a complaint against him, Tarak and Kusum at Hanskhali police station. However, Mamata, who had stated before the magistrate after the incident that Tarak had photographed her, has told the investigating officer that she cannot identify the man who photographed her. Ramakrishna has not been granted bail.

Mamata said that she was not "like a boy in any way". She said the girl with whom she was allegedly having an affair was just a friend, who was being tortured by her in-laws and would ask Mamata to visit her. Her mother said the same and removed Mamata's kurta to show her badly bruised back. "How will I get such a scarred girl married?" she asked angrily. At this point, Mamata lost her self-control and broke into sobs. "Aamar life-tai noshto kore diyechhe ora [They have just destroyed my life]," she cried between sobs and ran inside her house. By this time, a crowd of villagers had collected around the house. "Yes, she looks like a boy," an old man said. "She had short hair and wore pants. She also rides a bicycle and most of her friends are boys. But we all know she is a girl." We asked her if she had offended any one with her behaviour previously. At this, the man made a most startling statement: "There was no such incident before, but she was arrested on a murder charge," said the old man. "A boy from the village was killed three years ago and she was accused of the murder."

We went back to Mamata's house. Her mother was reluctant to speak, but said that Mamata had been picked up by the police after a neighbour's ten-year-old son was killed. She added that Mamata had served two terms at the Behrampore and Liluah correction homes for women and children, but was later released on bail. She said she didn't know why her daughter was picked up for the murder, but said Mamata was friendly with the dead boy's

sister.

We met Mamata again. She said she was innocent of the murder and of any liaison with the other girl, whose father had beaten her up. But when we asked her if the other girl also thought of her as another girl, Mamata said her friend had written her a letter "as a boy", to which, she replied "as a boy". "But I want to marry now. It is the duty of every girl to marry." "This time, too, a crowd had collected." "You can't leave without speaking to us," a man said. He made us sit in the courtyard of a nearby house and asked a couple, an old, frail man and his middle-aged wife, to come forward. The woman was holding a framed photograph to her breast, which showed the couple with a good-looking boy. "See this photograph! That girl, Murderer Mamata, killed this boy!" screamed one man. "She is a 'homo-sex'!" shouted another. The girl, who was assumed to have been victimized because of her deviant sexuality, was being charged with murder.

The parents of the dead boy began to tell their story. The woman could barely speak: "Tanmoy was our only son, born after four daughters," said Santosh Dhali, the village homeopath, "Mamata killed him because she had a physical relation with my youngest daughter."

Dhali said he was sleeping outside his house one night, but was woken by a noise. Mamata was staying over, as she often did, with his youngest daughter. When he entered the room, he saw the two girls in a "sexual" position. Next morning he told his daughter, now married and living in a neighbouring village, to end the relationship. He stopped Mamata from entering his house. That enraged her into threatening and beating up his other daughters. On September 12, 2003, the day the boy went missing, Mamata had apparently trailed the boy the whole day, at the end of which they were seen disappearing into the fields. His body was discovered from a pond on September 15. He had been strangled with jute fibre. Dhali's FIR alleged that Mamata had killed Tanmoy, the go-between for Mamata and his daughter. Dhali had found that out and asked Tanmoy to stop arranging meetings between the two girls. The boy backtracked, and Dhali said that Mamata killed him to take revenge.

The police picked up Mamata on September 20, 2003. She was produced at Salt Lake Juvenile Court, and, after being in correctional homes for about two months, came back to the village on bail. The

police "indifference" enrages the villagers: "She is a murderer. She goes after what really matters - the son. She beats everybody up, young men too. But they don't hit back at her, because after all she is a girl. Her mother says she is a farm labourer, but she is a prostitute and strange women come to her place at night. She is into meye pachar [trafficking of women]."

Ramakrishna's Moitra's wife said that her daughter was being harassed by Mamata for which her daughter's in-laws were upset. "That's why my husband beat her. She has terrorized all the villagers. Only photographing her was wrong." She pulled out a letter written by Mamata to her daughter. It was a passionate letter: "Last night, I wrote your name across the courtyard. You were sleeping then." "She had signed off," E.T. Tomar Moner Manush."

Mamata's trial is yet to start. Aparesh Das, the deputy panchayat chief of Gyanrapota, said that as the case was sub judice, the local CPI(M)-controlled panchayat could do little: "Although we condemn the incident we cannot go against the villagers."

WITH INPUTS FROM RABI BANERJEE

After the fact

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A political scientist, a psychiatrist and a lawyer comment on the incident in Boro Chupria.

NIVEDITA MENON (political scientist): Have you heard of 'nude make-up'? The whole point of it is to spend hours painting your face in order to make it look like you have just finished scrubbing it clean. The maintaining of social order is rather like that. It requires the faithful performance of daily rituals. Complex networks of cultural reproduction are dedicated to this sole purpose. But the ultimate goal is to produce the effect of untouched naturalness.

There is thus zero tolerance for those who breach this carefully produced natural order of society by refusing to conform to norms of looks and behaviour. The incident in which Mamata was

beaten, tansured and stripped naked for 'behaving like a boy' is one instance of the effort that goes into maintaining the natural order. It is all too easy to understand it as the action of uncivilized villagers. How different would the response be though in, say, the head-office of a multinational corporation, to a male employee who insisted on wearing a sari and bindi at work?

Thus, while the horror that Mamata had to live through may be at the more extreme end of a spectrum, the point precisely is that it is a spectrum of intolerance to difference. Each of us bears responsibility in some degree for maintaining these protocols of intolerance, which could not be kept in place if every single one of us did not play our part. From bringing up children appropriately, to lovingly correcting or punishing their inappropriate behaviour, to staring at people who look different, to coercive psychiatric and medical intervention, to emotional blackmail, to physical violence. It's a range of slippages all the way.

But the incident was not only about gender-appropriate looks and behaviour. It has another equally significant dimension - the anxiety around maintaining and protecting the institution of marriage. That is, of 'actually existing' marriage - the patriarchal, heterosexual kind. For the young girl was tortured not only because she behaved like a boy, but because she refused to give up her friendship with a newly-married woman of the village.

The question of gender-appropriate behaviour is thus inextricably linked to legitimate procreative sexuality as embodied in the patriarchal heterosexual family. This institution is the foundation for maintaining property relations as well as the source of the crucial identities of caste and religion.

The ideology that sustains this institution correctly recognizes non-heterosexual desire and defiance of gendered appearance as signalling the refusal to participate in the business of reproducing society, with all its given identities intact. The same threat is perceived with heterosexual desire too, when it refuses to flow in legitimate directions - hence the violence unleashed on those who fall in love even with people of the appropriate (that is, 'opposite') sex, if they are of inappropriate caste or religion.

Mamata is said to be 16, but is small and thin, and “looks about 12”. How did she escape the binding force of those protocols that most of us seem to have internalized so unquestioningly? Evidently, the structure built by those protocols is shakier than it seems. There are fissures, leakages, the borders are porous and vulnerable. There are many more Mamatas, perhaps even inside ourselves. It is precisely because the structure is so fragile that such enormous force had to be mobilized against the recalcitrance of one thin little girl.

CHANDRASEKHAR MUKHERJI (psychiatrist): In today’s rural India, tightly-knit hierarchies of caste, class and privilege allow little room for a tolerant accommodation of behaviour which is perceived to be different or deviant. More often than not, the victims of such disproportionate community responses are women. Societal attitudes to variations in sexual orientation have fluctuated over the ages. References in ancient Indian texts are not always stigmatizing. The unbending morality of the Victorian era brought with it the criminalization of homosexuality. The vigour with which the Indian urban middle class adopted such inflexible notions of correctness stemmed from the need to identify with the colonizer.

The penetration of such adopted attitudes into rural India has been more uneven. Words and phrases like masti and sahelī rishte describe same-sex relationships in rural India. However, where difference is perceived as a threat and perhaps even competition, the retaliation is massive. But what of the girl-child who starts to wear pants and behaves more and more ‘like a boy’? The outcomes vary. Some defy societal stricture and ‘marry’, as in Ambikapur or in Chhattisgarh. In such instances, the strength of their sexual orientation overcomes the knowledge that they are committing to a life of pain and stigmatization. Occasionally, I have come across cases where the strong-willed and probably privileged of such rural women undertake a sex-change operation. But some, like the girl suspected of ‘being a boy’, are tonsured, stripped and photographed naked. Comments made by her co-villagers reveal not only her pitiful loneliness but also an exaggerated demonization, which often precede or accompany violent acts. The ultimate loss in the small but structured world of the village is that of reputation and identity. There is nowhere to flee. I read with

interest Mamata's comment, "I want to marry now. It is the duty of every girl to marry." An act of self-preservation, perhaps appeasement, to ward off the frightening abyss of social oblivion.

TARUNABH KHAITAN (lawyer): The drama in Boro Chupria is an old one. Countless Mamatas are tortured and killed at the altar of caste, class, religion and sex. Mamata's transgressions were a combination of who she allegedly was ('boyish'), and what she allegedly did (developed relationships/friendships with other women). These acts of violence violate her most basic human rights, most fundamentally the right to life with dignity and the freedom from torture and other forms of violence.

The failure of the state in providing protection to the vulnerable is telling. The first mark of the movement from a state of nature to civilized society is the state's establishment of a monopoly over the use of force. The state alone may judge and punish, following due process of law. The Indian state may be failing its *raison d'être*, for it protects unequally.

The demand, then, is one of fairness. For queer identities that question the rules of gender and sexuality, even a normative recognition of the right to a dignified life is not forthcoming. Legal provisions, such as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, aid rather than counter societal violence against sexual and gender minorities. But the state alone is not to blame. A society that engages in and tolerates collective acts of violence against helpless people is in urgent need of moral introspection. The denial of the suffering of hijras, kothis, gays, lesbians and bisexuals is usually disguised as a need to deal with 'more important issues', like poverty. But suffering cannot be hierarchized. Different facets of vulnerability like class, caste, gender, sexuality, race, religion and so on do not act independently of one another, they intersect. The movements founded by Dalits, women, religious minorities and the poor share their most important article of faith with sexual and gender minorities - a belief in the equal moral worth of every individual. Mamata's story should be the last word on the concern that gender and sexuality are 'elite' issues.

P.S.

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