LEARNING ABOUT SEX IN MUMBAI:

RETHINKING THE ‘KNOWLEDGE GAP’ DEBATE IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Introduction

“Have you seen any advertisements which say ‘we teach how to dhinchak dhinchak’ (have sex)? In life one needs to learn all this by ourselves.” ~ Vishu in Balak Palak² (2012)

Sexuality education in school spaces embodies a specific type of sexual knowledge, one which is very different from the type of sexual knowledge available through other sources such as peer discussions, gossip, pornography or cinema. As the above quote suggests, most adolescents acquire sexual knowledge on their own, outside the space of the classroom. This presents to us one of the key debates in sexuality education: the problem of ‘knowledge gap’ which signifies the gap between what is taught in the classroom and adolescents’ sexual knowledge and experiences. Louisa Allen (2001) theorises this ‘knowledge gap’ as constructing two forms of sexual knowledge, or rather two discourses: one is the ‘official discourse’ which is present in the sexuality education curriculum in the classroom which focuses on sexual health, contraception, puberty, menstruation and so on; another is the ‘unofficial discourse’ which is present in the sources of information that adolescents have on sex outside the classroom (like pornographic material) and the conversations that adolescents have with their peers about sex, bodies and attraction.

This chapter attempts to read this ‘unofficial’ body of knowledge on sex not as a lack, or a reason to institute formal sex education, but as a legitimate discourse on sex and sexuality, understood on its own terms. By doing this, I no longer place it in a hierarchy but see it as another form of sexual knowing, thus decentraling the ‘official’ discourse of sexuality education. I read the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ discourses as two forms of sexual knowing which, while they do overlap, cannot be always brought together. While sex education continues to be the ‘official’ discourse on sex and sexuality, adolescents’ sexual knowledge outside the classroom, I argue, is structured in such a way that it does not easily occupy the space of the classroom. Sexual knowledge learned from peers, from pornography, from jokes and so on cannot necessarily and does not always need to be a part of the classroom. In the

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¹ Dhinchak Dhinchak is a term used used in the Marathi film Balak Palak (2013) to talk about sex.

² Balak Palak (2013), a Marathi film, narrates four adolescents’ experiences of learning about sexuality.
following sections I analyse how this ‘unofficial’ discourse is constituted, circulated and who
the important players are. I argue that this discourse is not ‘ordered scientifically’ in the way
the discourse on sex education is systematised. Rather, sexual meanings and sexual knowing
are scattered across different sites: pornographic material, sexual jokes, different forms of
peer conversations, gossip, still and moving images.

The idea of ‘knowledge gap’ is articulated in different ways in Western scholarship. In Louisa
Allen’s (2001) study in New Zealand, the participants mentioned how knowledge gleaned
from sexual experience and relationships was seen as more valuable than knowledge got in
the classroom about pregnancy and disease prevention. Her paper has aimed at closing this
‘gap’ by including a discourse of erotics within the classroom. In other studies (Allen 2006,
Haste 2013, Ashcraft 2003) scholars have examined the ‘unofficial discourse’ of sexual
knowledge and the role of popular culture in sex education. While these studies acknowledge
the sources of information about sexuality outside the classroom and engage with it, the
purpose of this engagement seems to be to fill gaps within sexuality education itself. In other
words, they aim to address the lack of erotics within sexuality education.

The ‘knowledge gap’ manifests itself differently in studies in the Indian context. Most
academic scholarship in the Indian context endorses the idea that the knowledge that
adolescents receive from sources outside the classroom are inadequate and that sexuality
education is required to give ‘correct information’. A number of studies on adolescent sexual
and reproductive health in the Indian context have addressed this problem of ‘knowledge
gap’. Philip Matthew (2005), in his report, examines the attitudes of adolescent students –
both boys and girls – in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, towards gender, sexuality, sexual and
reproductive health and rights. The rationale behind the study is to address adolescent sexual
and reproductive health issues, adopting a gender and human rights based approach. The
objectives are to “find out what issues adolescents face with regard to gender, sexuality,
sexual and reproductive health and rights;” and subsequently to “to find out the area of
emphasis and, relevant mechanisms, and strategies to develop a life skills education
programme” (Matthew 2005: 12, 13). Matthew notes how boys have greater access to sexual
information and pornography than girls, and how most of these boys derive their information
on sex from friends and cousins. This difference in access to sexual knowledge by boys and
girls, Matthew notes, causes “improper sexual practices and exploitation of girls and women”
(2005: 60).

Like Matthew’s study, Nayar et al.’s (2007) paper also examines how boys have greater
access to information on sex than girls, but are also misinformed. The study assesses “the
gaps in students’ knowledge and understand[s] their attitudes and beliefs about sexuality and HIV/AIDS” (Nayar 2007: 73) and seeks to correct it through ‘proper’ sexuality education. Nayar et al conclude that “if information is not provided to curious adolescents at the right age, they would tend to look for it from unreliable sources and consequently get incorrect information” (Nayar 2007: 81). Leena Abraham and Anil Kumar (1999) also study college students’ sexual experiences in Mumbai to conclude that “school-based sexuality programs are needed that will provide students with accurate information about pregnancy, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases”.

Hemant Apte (2004) notes that the “dearth of reliable information [on sexual and reproductive health matters], is a major obstacle in the path of the campaign to check the spread of HIV/AIDS” (109). Apte maintains that “a large share of information (and misinformation) about sexual matters comes from their peers and from ‘yellow books and blue films’” (Apte 2004: 109). In his study of 200 men in Pune, he found that most of them get their information on sex from Marathi pornographic literature. Analysing this literature, he arrives at a hypothesis that this pornographic material “has detrimental effects on the attitudes and behaviours of young students in Pune, as well as other areas of India” (Apte 2004: 124). Apte suggests that sex education be taught in schools to counter the ‘ill effects’ of pornography on young men.

This scholarship on adolescent sexual knowledge “formulated in a language of health” adopts a “uni-directional model of social change” (Vance 1991: 877) by positing sex education as the panacea for the ‘ills’, lack and misinformation of adolescent sexual knowledge. The sexual knowledge that adolescents get outside the classroom is read in these studies as misogynistic, exploitative or misinformed. While this might be true, this body of knowledge on sex is seen in the form of a lack, and inferior to the ‘scientific’ and ‘proper’ knowledge of the classroom.

Most of the studies cited above either solely examine adolescent males’ access to sexual knowledge (Apte 2004) or comment on how adolescent males have greater access to information on sex (Nayar 2007, Matthew 2005). My fieldwork in Mumbai also suggests that adolescent males have greater access to information on sex than adolescent females. Simultaneously, the studies reviewed also express greater anxiety over adolescent males’ sexuality, exemplified in Leena Abraham’s statement: “Indian family and educational institutions are losing their traditional level of control over students’- especially male students’- sexual behaviour” (Abraham 1999: 146). This anxiety is also related to adolescent males’ consumption of pornography (Apte 2004), and their misogynist attitudes towards adolescent girls (Matthew 2005). In engaging with the ‘unofficial discourse’ on its own terms,
it might be necessary to rethink this anxiety over adolescent males’ sexuality and access to information on sex.

I draw on interviews with seventeen³ middle-class, young men from Mumbai, between the ages of eighteen and twenty seven years, reflecting on their adolescent lives. This sample is not representative and the group of interviewees is purposefully small because the attempt is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of middle class adolescent male sexual knowledge but to open it up to closer examination. Apart from fieldwork with young men, the chapter also draws upon a textual analysis of popular cinema in Mumbai over the last few years to reflect on adolescent male sexual knowledge. Cinematic texts are used to build a context and to substantiate the narratives from the young men. There are also ruptures between cinematic imaginations of sexual learning and narratives of young men in Mumbai. The paper draws from Balak Palak (2013) and Hunterr (2015) which represent adolescent males’ sexual lives and discuss sexual learning.

Understanding adolescent sexual knowledge requires a revisit to the sexual cultures of in India. Various scholars over the last decade have examined the different sexual cultures in India. Sanjay Srivastava (2006) examines the production of subaltern masculine sexual culture through footpath pornography. In a later essay, Srivastava (2013b) examines the different “sexual narratives that address the urban middle-classes, both as readers as well as subjects”. These are embodied partly in internet ‘pornographic’ comics and in the new spaces of residence and leisure. Patricia Uberoi (2011) situates the sexual cultures of the middle classes within the sex surveys of the past and present where she notes “that the deployment of sexual ‘knowledge’ may have an important connection with class formation and the construction of class identities, especially the self-understanding of the upper middle classes” (2011, 277). While my respondents’ middle class lives do not seem as vulnerable as those of subaltern men (Srivastava 2004, 2006), there are a number of overlaps in terms of the pornographic material that they consume.

³ I have included interviews with seventeen men only since the remaining three didn’t have sufficient responses on sexual knowledge.
“Sexual Knowledge” of Adolescent Males in Middle Class Mumbai

Swear Words, Sexual Jokes, Metaphors and Images

Sexual knowledge among middle class adolescent males in Mumbai is often mediated by language. Cameron and Kulick (2003) note: “the ‘reality’ of sex does not pre-exist the language in which it is expressed; rather, language produces the categories through which we organize our sexual desires, identities and practices” (19). Gilbert (2004) also notes the importance of language to sexuality: “According to psychoanalysis, language is also constitutive of sexuality. The capacity for language and the attendant achievement of using narratives to organize the self are a part of what comes to be called sexuality” (Gilbert 2004: 110). In this section I examine how swear words, sexual jokes, metaphors and visual images are important in learning about sex and sexuality. Varun who went to an all boys’ school describes how his introduction to sex and sexuality was through slangs and swear words.

My initiation into all this [sex and sexuality] was through cuss words like fuck. I didn’t know what fuck meant. It was just a very bad word- ultimate insult. I grew curious about it and happened to ask a few people, what does fuck mean. The first person I asked told me to go shout outside Churchgate Station “Fuuuuck” at the top of your voice and see what comes. The other cuss words were sucker, which I later came to know didn’t mean anything, they just made a big deal out of it. Bastard was [another cuss word]. And there were the Hindi ones: MC [Maaderchod (mother fucker)], BC [Behenchod (sister fucker)]. There was chutiya also. Lots of people were confused about what it actually meant. That is when I came to know what the actual sexual act entailed. It seems absurd now. Earlier, in the fifth and sixth standards, they [students] didn’t use all these cuss-words like fuck you, bastard. Suddenly from the seventh standard, it was pretty distinct, and that corresponded to an awareness about sexuality. Again most kids that age were introduced to sex and sexuality through cuss-words.

Attached to these swear words are notions of prohibition, secrecy, and ambiguity. Meanings of swear words are often blown out of proportion. While many of the words are derogatory and misogynist⁴, they are also ambiguous and confusing to the adolescent males who use them. Prohibition plays a large role in the use of swear words. Varun’s friend who urged him to go shout ‘fuck’ outside the local train station is aware of the prohibitions on the use of the word ‘fuck’. Knowledge of the sexual act introduced through these swear words acquires some of the prohibitions and thrills of transgressing that prohibition. Another participant Nitin went to an all boys’ school which was extremely strict. Using swear words in such schools allowed his friends to experience the transgressive pleasures of sex without actually engaging in sexual activity. Nitin discusses how the “use of Hindi bad words in school was common. Words were meant to be experimented with. There were many jokes- like the Osho discourse

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⁴ For instance swear words like maaderchod and behenchod which mean mother-fucker and sister-fucker respectively.
on the word *fuck*\(^5\) which was very popular. The Hindi words were around sex.” Nitin goes on to talk about how jokes about sex were a means to alleviate the monotony of school: “Jokes used bad language and were about sex so it was exciting. There were jokes about adultery. School was so strict that telling these jokes was a big joy.”

Metaphors and sexual jokes form an integral part of sexual knowledge. The sexual act is not discussed in the clinical manner of textbooks, rather, metaphors specific to a certain cultural understanding of sexuality- such as *suhaag raat*\(^6\) - are used to describe and explain sex. Heraan, who went to an all-boys’ school in South Mumbai, discusses at length below how “sex was taught through jokes” as well as through poetry and songs.

A sir had asked another female teacher, ‘Miss, is my pen with you?’ I think they made a joke of that. Like in the geography class, one student said that India is a phallus jutting out in the Indian Ocean and you can count Sri Lanka as the drops… We had a hymn [in school]: ‘This guiding light of mine, let it shine, let it shine all the time.’ So instead of light we would say penis- ‘This guiding penis of mine, let it shine, let it shine, all the time’. Then [the poem] Agneepath\(^7\) ‘Yeh khada vriksha hai, chal raha manushya hai’ [the tree is standing and man is walking] instead of saying vriksha [tree] you say lund [penis], yeh khada lund hai, chal raha manushya hai, hoke khoon se latpat, latpat [the penis is standing, man is walking, covered in blood]. How the Eiffel tower is a phallus erected right in the middle of Paris.

In the quote above one notices how sexual knowledge marks the entire experience of schooling for these boys, from geography class, to teacher interactions, to schools hymns, to famous dialogues from popular cinema. Learning about sexuality is not restricted to diagrams of the reproductive systems, but is present in everyday sexual jokes. Even school hymns and other songs are sexualised. But language used to talk about the sexual act, while metaphorical, can also draw from the vocabulary of other knowledge systems. In the quote below, Varun narrates how his friend drew from mathematics and history to explain sex to him.

A friend of mine explained to me what the actual sexual act entails. I still remember, he used a very strange word to describe it. He said when the male penis and the female vagina, when they intersect. Intersect is a very academic word in geometry. This was in seventh standard. That didn’t make any sense. I didn’t have a mental picture of it, nothing. So, that was kind of confusing… I wasn’t familiar with the language which was used to convey… kind of sex or

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\(^5\) Osho, a spiritual teacher, speaks of the versatile use of the word ‘fuck’. He says that apart from the sexual meaning, fuck also express other sentiments such as: ignorance, trouble, aggression, displeasure, hostility, enjoyment and so on. [http://www.spiritualsatya.com/osho-meaning-and-versatility-of-the-word-fuck/](http://www.spiritualsatya.com/osho-meaning-and-versatility-of-the-word-fuck/)

\(^6\) *Suhaag raat* is a term used to denote the first night that the bride and groom will spend together. Since it is assumed that the couple haven’t engaged in any form of sexual intimacy before marriage, the first night marks the beginning of their sexual relationship.

\(^7\) Agneepath is a well known poem written in Hindi by the poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan. A film titled Agneepath was made in 1990 and 2012 in which the poem forms the thematic link throughout the film. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBWunzqHcew](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBWunzqHcew). It must also be noted that Heraan doesn’t recite the exact lines from the poem.
sexuality and everything around it. This friend of mine who first told me about the sexual act was very fond of Egyptian history. One day he casually told me that Cleopatra slept with hundred people. So I said, slept with hundred people? How did they build a bed big enough? And he said, dude main kya bol raha hoon, tu kya pooch raha hai. [I am telling you about something, and you are questioning me on another topic altogether]. He said dude, she f*cked hundred people. Then he said sleeping around also means this.

Kevin discusses how learning about sexuality was a slow process, and that he learnt through various sources: jokes, puberty, sitcoms, and even by having crushes on girls. More importantly, this learning is organic and happens by putting ‘two and two together’, rather than being taught ‘ready-made’ information.

Prakash also discusses how learning about sexuality was a gradual, organic process and that like Kevin, he also ‘put two and two together’. Jokes were also sexual in nature. These jokes played a dual role: they were a source of information about sexuality as well as a way to assimilate the information they had learnt. Prakash also talks about innovating, playing and having fun with sexual knowledge by making mainstream subjects like sciences, economics and biology sexy. This is similar to Heraan’s narrative earlier when he talks about geography classes being sexualised.

Some of them [the words] were just insults, we were just talking to each other, call each other names. I didn't quite understand them and I was not quite inclined to go and google them. Just basic ones like you would use: fuck and all that… other stuff like horny. [Some of the] words that I didn't understand: jerking off… they would abuse in hindi, [but] the conversations were in English, the terms were in English... As I grew older, I started understanding what meant by what. It wasn't classes that gave me that understanding, it was just that as I grew up when I saw things around me, that I thought ok this is this and that is that, and that means that. Put two and two together... We had actions to indicate when teachers would say something and pick it up and make our own jokes. That was spontaneous. [This happened] in physics or chemistry, in science classes especially, there were jokes on heat transfer from one person to another. And in biology when we just started in [the] seventh and eighth standard, we found it amusing. In biology classes all these jokes would happen. In economics [class] we had this guy called Slutzio etc… Certain terms had acronyms and we would make acronyms and use them. [For instance] marginal cost, [its] acronym was MC… It was after we had information and knowledge [about sex] that we started innovating and playing, having our own fun with it. From the class and movies we were introduced to sex and sexuality. We would watch movies and we would see some stuff and our parents would fast forward, that scene. And inherently that urge would come [to know] what would happen there. Then we would google it. So we were like that is how things work…

Louisa Allen (2014) discusses the use of humour in sexuality education. Quoting Barnes, she notes that sexual humour within boys’ peer groups can play a regulatory role “to police and to
maintain the boundaries of “acceptable” masculinity; to gain and to keep status within the group; to defuse tension in the classroom; and, finally, to exclude those who transgress or who cannot conform to the norms of the dominant discourse of masculinity in operation” (389). Allen notes that studies on boys’ use of humour in classrooms is a way “to subvert the classroom’s learning agenda and teacher’s authority, while consolidating heterosexual masculinities” (394). Other studies of humour in the classroom (Abraham et al. 2014) note how humour in the classroom helps foster better student-teacher relationships and student learning. But Allen’s (2014) focus in her paper is on the pedagogic implications of using humour in sexuality education. Her research in schools in New Zealand indicate that humour is used in sexuality education classrooms as a means of dissipating embarrassment, making the information more ‘normalised’, facilitating students’ learning, and helping teachers maintain students’ interest. For instance, in Heraan’s, Varun’s, Prakash’s and Kevin’s narratives, the use of sexual humour amongst boys’ groups not only maintains masculine hierarchies but also helps in learning about sexuality. Regular classroom learning- geography, mathematics, English, economics- becomes sexualised, humorous and offers a means for learning about sexuality. Sexual humour becomes a means of learning about sexuality within and outside the classroom; it is not bound within the sexual education class but cuts across disciplinary boundaries too.

Ayan discusses how ‘code words’ were used in conversations on sexuality and how he could access those code words only when he was older.

I remember boys in my society [residential complex] used to talk about masturbation and watching porn...they used to use code words...[like] BP (blue picture)...I didn't know that time what it was fully. After seventh and eighth standard I got to know what it was actually.

Manish, who is attracted to men while growing up, discusses at length the role that words, body parts- especially women’s- played in learning about sex and sexuality as well as the words used in Hindi to talk about having sex. These discussions centre around pornography and the notion that a woman always enjoys having sex on the screen. Manish also makes it clear in the interview that he never really felt a part of these discussions since they included adolescent boys whose masculinity he was not comfortable with. As the quote below demonstrates, these boys use misogynistic ways to learn and talk about sex, objectifying women’s body parts.

Manish: There was no other word; it was always ball (for breasts). Cleavage would always be gulli (alley)...The fellow students’ breasts [would] be discussed, especially when we were growing up.

Ketaki: What were the words used to talk about sex?
Manish: Porn, always maarna, gaand maarna, maar raha tha, means fucking, or chodna, bahut choda... and she was also getting it done with a lot of fun. Masturbation was moot marma. In closer circles, when it was more intimate (with friends) then it would be moot marma. But when porn would be discussed it would always be chodna, chudana, marna.

Varun notes how this linguistic representation of sex was not only confusing, but also failed to give him a ‘mental image’ of the act. While language plays an important role in acquiring sexual knowledge, visual images of sex are also equally important. Similarly, Pratik, who is twenty-one years old, discusses how images acquire a significant place in adolescent males’ sexual knowledge. He notes how middle class boys don’t have a culture of reading, which makes using images a simpler and more effective way to access sexual knowledge.

They would have a CD, because... this was basically a space where there was no encouragement of any sort of reading... the allure of an audio-visual media was quite high. Of course the information wasn’t written, [it] was not literary information that people gathered. Mostly [of] it was visual information: that was basically viewing porn, or maybe viewing sex scenes in Hollywood movies.

Nitin also discusses the importance of the image. He notes that the process of sex, which is what formal sex education aims to talk about, did not really interest his friends when they were growing up in the 1990s. Rather they were curious about the image of a woman’s body. “In the Mid-day Mate8 there was a picture of a woman in a bikini. People were passing it around and photocopying it... The curiosity was with the image, no one really wanted to know the process of sex.” The desire of Nitin’s friends in the 1990s and of Pratik’s friends in the first decade of 2000 revolves around images of bodies of women and men. The meanings that they make of sex have nothing to do with disease prevention, contraception or reproductive health. Sexuality for these boys inhabits either the body of a woman- in a bikini- or in the bodies on screen- in Hollywood sex scenes or pornography. The centrality of the body of the woman to understand sex can be heterosexist, since it sexualises the woman’s body and understands sex as being only between a man and woman.

The interviewees’ narratives that I analyse here represent narrow understandings of sex: as heterosexual or within the marriage (suhaag raat as a metaphor for sex). Swear words, apart from being prohibited, often sexualise the body of the woman. In that case, to learn about sex through these swear words might not prove productive. But I would like to argue that this process of acquiring knowledge might not necessarily cause ‘injury’ in the way the use of hate speech does. Adolescent males’ discussions of swear words are often done within all boys’ peer group. In these discussions, these speech acts are not addressed to anyone in particular. Following Butler (1997), one might contend that they become failed performatives

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88 The Mid-Day Mate is a supplement in the newspaper Mid-Day published in Mumbai.
and not cause injury. There is also no causal relationship between the discussion of swear/abusive words and actual sexual behaviour. The ambiguity with which swear words are interpreted also deflect the criticism that swear words necessarily promote sexist attitudes among adolescent males.\(^9\)

**Discussions, Gossip and the Importance of Peer Groups**

This section starts with a brief textual reading of the popular Marathi film *Balak Palak* (2013). This helps to contextualise adolescent sexual knowledge. The discussion of the ethnography of sexual knowledge with young men in Mumbai foregrounds the ruptures between the filmic imagination of sexual knowledge and the narratives of the young men. *Balak Palak* (2013) is based in Mumbai in the mid 1980s and tells the story of four middle class adolescent friends Avya, Chiu, Dolly and Bhagya. The four friends one day overhear women in their chawl\(^10\) discussing *shen khaane* (which literally means ‘eating cow dung’ but figuratively means bringing disgrace) as they watch a young woman Jyoti Tai being expelled from their colony. The adolescents collectively try to make sense of the term by consulting a dictionary, asking their parents, but are unable to arrive at an answer. As a last resort, they enlist the help of the lower class boy Vishu, a local ruffian and ‘good-for-nothing’.

Vishu gathers that these adolescents have no knowledge about sex and goes about teaching them the ‘basics’, which according to him involves nine steps. Vishu employs the term *dhinchak dhinchak* to talk about sex, which he characterises as hot and cold simultaneously. In a pedagogic manner Vishu notes that the ‘subject’ of *dhinchak dhinchak* is pure like meditation and penance. He starts his ‘class’ by handing out booklets with pornographic stories and images. Throughout the film, Vishu adopts a pedagogic manner and takes the job of educating his friends very seriously. The four adolescents circulate pornographic booklets amongst themselves, hiding it in drainage pipes, under the pillow, under the bed and reading it in hiding. Vishu meets them regularly to give them more tips on sex, telling them that one should not regard any woman as a ‘sister’ since every woman is after all a ‘sex object’. Vishu

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\(^9\) Civil society and social work paradigms have a different understanding of the role of abusive and slang words in young man’s life. For instance, Manish Kumar runs a ‘Gali Band’ (Stop Abusive Words) campaign in Uttar Pradesh which asks boys to stop using abusive words. This effort is seen as an extension of the work with men in constructing a ‘gender-just’ society.

\(^10\) A chawl is a type of building which provides cheap housing to middle class and working class people in Mumbai.
notes how “there are no tuitions for such acts.” He asks “have you seen any ads which say ‘we teach how to dhinchak dhinchak’? In life one needs to learn all this by ourselves.”

The next step in the four friends’ sexual education is to secretly watch a couple having sex. Vishu explains that sex “has a different timetable. Some do it twice, some thrice, some four times a week.” To this Chiu asks: “Who does it daily?” Vishu replies that “the newlyweds do it daily.” The five of them try to spy on a newlywed couple in Vishu’s colony, but fail to do so. Vishu then suggests that they watch a pornographic film, which he calls BP (blue film/picture). The two boys, Avya and Bhagya, go to the local Holy Palace Video to borrow the video cassette of Raat Raani Chi Shaitani (The Wicked Night Queen). When their parents are away, they secretly watch the pornographic video. Except for Dolly, the other three friends are willing to watch more videos and continue their ‘sex education’. But Dolly refuses to continue watching pornographic videos, stating that “we wanted answers, and now we have them, we don’t need to watch these films anymore”. She continues to ask “when was the last time we played together?” Vishu rebukes her and tells the others that Dolly has no ‘thirst for knowledge’ and that the others should continue their ‘education’, since there is a lot more to learn. After this scene the film follows a moral and predictable narrative where the four friends disband, the boys start viewing all women as sex objects and finally an elderly uncle in their chawl decides to talk to them about how adolescents should learn about sexuality from ‘proper’ sources and adults/parents rather than from pornographic films.

While the film is set in the 1980s it is possible to read it as a typical narrative of how sexual knowledge circulates among adolescent males in the 1990s and first decade of 2000. The film raises a number of points explored in this section: the importance of peer networks to sexual knowledge; sexual knowledge as discussion around words and terminology; the trope of the adolescent ‘teacher’ and the importance of gossip in sexual knowledge.

Twenty-five year old Jerry, who went to an all boys’ Catholic school, mentions how “peers are very important. That is where you get information from, particularly your seniors; you learn stuff from them.” Pratik discusses the thrill in discussing about sex with peers

...just talking about [sex], that thrill, discussing with peers, was a way to maybe assert your own hetero-normative masculine identity. So if you don’t find it attractive- there is always something wrong with you… One of the most dominant ways of being educated, [or having] sexual knowledge was having a peer, or senior explain it to you, because parents rarely had these conversations with kids. An elder [male] cousin told me about what sex is. He knew, he was older, he had friends who [possessed] porn. If we were at home together, he would tell me what sex is.

Similarly Heraan also discusses how he was “told [about sex] by an elder cousin.” He goes on to mention that he lived in “a very secluded area, so usually you see a guy and a girl standing
behind a car. One thing leads to another and your cousin explains to you why they are behind the car. That is how I was told. That is the rite of passage.” The idea of ‘rite of passage’ problematises the understanding that sexual knowledge is only acquired when adolescents are curious about sex. While a ‘rite of passage’ does not leave much room for individual agency, it also points to us the different reasons for the circulation of sexual knowledge. Heraan, who identifies himself as a homosexual, also points to how this ‘rite of passage’ was heterosexist. He laments that “it would have been better if my cousin would have told me about both [heterosexuality and homosexuality] instead of just male and female.”

Veeru also mentions the importance of peer groups to learn about the body. He recounts the following incident: “Shruti [one friend] came out of the loo and said ‘Dude, Michelle [another friend] did not know that there are three holes.’ I didn’t know either, that the urethra was separate from the vagina. Peer groups help to know.” Veeru, who also identifies himself as a homosexual, felt alienated from his male friends since he found them hyper masculine and didn’t have a peer group of boys. He continues to say that he “didn’t have peer group discussions about the body because [he] found it too taboo to speak about.” Veeru’s homosexuality alienated him from the other boys in his class, making the process of acquiring sexual knowledge from his peer group taboo. One sees that sexual knowledge from peers constructs sexuality as heteronormative. Heraan and Veeru lament this casting of sexual knowledge as heteronormative since it erases their experience of desiring boys.

Sexual knowledge is acquired within peer groups through discussions of words and phrases, similar to the way the four friends in Balak Palak seek sexual knowledge to understand the phrase shen khaane. Jerry mentions how discussions were essential for learning about sex: “It [knowledge about sex] starts off sometimes with words, so you don’t know the meaning of a word, what boobs are for example. There [is] a lot of discussion about that.” Pratik also discusses how there was a lot of thrill in discussing phrases like suhaag raat (first night of the marriage). Students who didn’t know about sex were taught through these metaphors. Jerry goes further to mention how there were “two different kinds” of discussions.

One was where people were discussing things- [these were] sort of more equal sessions. [People would] contribute too and [ask for] clarification on certain things. Like either ‘what does this abuse mean’, ‘what is that’, or ‘what does that act mean’. Even in these kind of situations, some people[‘s] information [was] more valued…

The second kind of discussion is based on a hierarchy of sexual knowledge, where one person has more knowledge about sex than others. This kind of discussion employs the trope of the teacher as seen in Balak Palak. Jerry describes this ‘student-teacher’ discussion in the following manner.
If a guy in my class had just discovered something awesome online, he would tell us. At that time not all of us had access to computers or access to internet. So for those who did [have access to internet] became the people who would come and tell stories. So people would sit and ask [them] ‘what next’... a lot of spices [was] added and they made this a huge thing.

Pratik discusses how those who had access to internet or a computer were “important social actors”. In Nitin’s narrative, one can read how social class is intimately tied to who had sexual knowledge and how that affects the dynamics of the peer group. But unlike Balak Palak, it is the upper middle class boys who have access to information about sex since they own personal computers.

Some people would boast about what they saw. These were people who were well off, who had internet access, a PC, their own room. In a class of fifty, only probably five had access to a PC and internet. There was a big class differentiation. There was a class difference, those who were English speaking and kept [the] company of certain boys.

Vinay describes the pedagogic manner in which boys engaged with sexual knowledge as giving gyan (giving advice). In Vinay’s narrative those who learn from the most sexually knowing person are often sceptical of his knowledge and consider it to be bragging. Many other interviewees also narrate about the importance of a ‘teacher figure’ that peer groups provide.

Whoever did speak about [sexual knowledge], would … have that mentality about giving gyan (giving advice), mujhe sab aata hai (I know everything). They wouldn’t know shit about it, but they would still brag about it.

Vinay owns up to giving advice within his own group which, he says, was mostly about ‘dumbass things’. Vinay’s narrative also uncovers the idea of the ‘teacher’ who knows everything. Varun’s narrative below explores this idea in further detail. It reveals the feeling of sufficiency that adolescent males have with regard to sexual knowledge. It also points to the limits of formal sex education which does not go beyond the instrumentalist approach of sexual and reproductive health without any discussion of the erotics of sexuality.

[Sex education] make[s] it so self contained that you feel you don’t need anything else. ‘Yeh hota hai, yeh hota hai, yeh hota hai. Sab pata chal gaya’ (This is this way, that is that way, now we know everything). And then you kind of have this feeling: ‘Yehi to hai na, bas na (This is only limited in this manner, that is all)’. But other things like erogenous zones… about the menstrual cycle, not just a table about when this hormone goes up, when that hormone comes down [but] what you feel, what happens. Which days are what? What is happening physiologically and physically? [Sex education should] probably [be] explained in a different context, in a different light. So ‘this’ means ‘this’ in real life, we are not going be walking around like doctors, examining people like doctors. What is [sex, sexuality] in real life?

Like Varun, Saras also demonstrates self-sufficiency when it comes to sexual knowledge. He claims that most of his friends learn about sex through peers and the internet and that they are not interested in being taught within the classroom. He would rather like to know about
consent, romance, how to ask a girl out and how to date. Like Varun, he points to the limits of an instrumentalist approach to sex education and stresses on an embodied and erotic learning about sexuality. Saras is also the only one who talks about consent, gender and ‘objectification of women’ and how that is not something you might learn on your own or through peers. He mentions how it is important to be taught about consent. This is a different understanding of sex education; most other critiques centre on the lack of erotics. This narrative speaks to a different conception of formal sexuality education.

Ketaki: What would you have liked to learn [in the sex education class]?

Saras: It was just fine; we eventually learn it anyways. We were not serious at that age. If someone told you something, we would listen, giggle about it, and forget it. Maybe it would affect one or two people… it is difficult to implement. If you can find someone to confide in, you don't need anyone. As such, most people don't, and most people will learn [about sex] anyways… we will make a joke out of [the sex education class]. Maybe one or two people will listen [in the class], because no one is serious about it.

Ketaki: Why is no one serious about it?

Saras: It is basically like any other subject, no one wants to know. [If we] have some doubts, we get it sorted anyways. Nowadays we have internet, there are people, plenty of videos. Not a problem now, at least in Mumbai. By eighteen you know everything… But one thing I would like to change, objectifying women has to stop. That has to be inculcated from the start, not sex education. You learn about sex anyways, the thing that has to be taught is not to objectify women. Because I am not seeing in some of my friends; everyone has information now... [We want to learn about] men's perspective and women's perspective separately… then I would compare the two. First I would say that it is consensual, and should be consensual, should not be forced. [I would like to learn] about [my] urges, about approaching a girl, about approaching someone, talking about it, more important, not keeping to yourself (not keeping one's feelings to oneself), masturbation, and protection and other STDs.

Varun and Saras do no stand alone in their disinterest in classroom based sexuality education. Louisa Allen (2006) writes about the studies which indicate that boys are typically uninterested in sex education. “In the British context, Forrest (2000) and Davidson (1996) have described how boys typically appear uninterested in sex education. Other researchers suggest that boys often experience dissatisfaction with sex education, viewing it as of minimal relevance to them (Hilton 2001). These reactions are explained by the prevention focus of many programmes which has produced a concentration on contraception and pregnancy that young men conceptualise as girls’ responsibility and therefore not pertinent to them…” (Allen 2006: 79). Self-sufficiency, disinterest and a know-all attitude emerges in Varun’s and Saras’ narratives. While it might be possible that sex education is not meeting young men’s needs and interests, what Varun and Saras’ narratives indicate is that this disinterest is tied to a performance of masculine identity. Adolescent boys cannot afford to ‘officially’ admit that they do not know enough about sexuality, or that they need to be taught about it. Their
vulnerability can manifest itself precariously within peer groups, but cannot surface within the classroom. Sexual knowledge is tied to performances of hegemonic masculinity. This is destabilised if boys have to rely solely on the classroom for learning about sexuality. As discussed earlier, adolescent male romance is characterised by indeterminacy, but sexual knowledge for boys is characterised by certainty.

Gossip also forms an integral part of acquiring sexual knowledge. Farhad discusses how gossip was indispensable to talking and learning about sex. “[Gossips] typically [were] ‘I met this girl and I sat next to her and when we were studying… my hand was touching her breast’…” Many of the young men I interviewed discussed how they would gossip about real or imaginary girlfriends and what they did with her. This became part of the sex talk which comprised of discussions around pornography and swear words too. Seemanthini Niranjana (2001, 98) refers to gossip as women’s speech and how it “participates in the sexualisation of bodies and requires women to position themselves in relation to certain dominant codes”. She goes on to note how the “uniqueness of gossip… lies in the fact that in spite of being a marginal or peripheral discourse, it often works to define the social and moral boundaries of a community… Another central feature of gossip tends to be talk about morality, especially deriving from contexts like the alleged sexual affairs of people, any transgressions of moral behavioural codes or deviations from accepted norms” (Niranjana 2001: 95). I would like to extend Niranjana’s understanding of gossip to include adolescent boys’ speech too, since to gossip about real or imagined sexual conquests is an integral part of adolescent males’ sex talk and of ascertaining their heterosexual masculinity. Like women’s gossip, adolescent males’ gossip is meant to define social boundaries, in this case of being a hegemonic heterosexual adolescent male.

Another major form of sex talk and ‘unofficial discourse’ around sexuality education are the discussions around pornography. Ayan, Prakash, Kevin and Manish discuss the different ways in which sex talk amongst boy were centred on pornography. Closely linked to these were discussions about masturbation and were ways to demonstrate one’s masculinity and virility. Ayan talks about how his peers didn’t have detailed conversations about pornography but did speak at length about masturbation; the latter was a way to ascertain a boy’s masculinity.

Ayan: After I got to know about porn, we used to talk about what sites people go on, what kind of porn they watch.

Ketaki: What were the discussions like?
Ayan: We didn't have any detailed discussions...we watch porn, you watch porn, ok good...in [housing] societies people used to categorise porn ... like ... amateur porn, milf porn. In our peer [group] we didn't talk about it.

Ketaki: what was the conversation in your peer group on sex and sexuality?

Ayan: I don't think we had any conversations about it. Even if we had talks, we used to talk about porn, if someone asked me I would say yes I watch.

Prakash's discussion of pornography with his friends is playful and is used to tease one another. Prakash’s peers also discuss which sites are more useful.

It was generally about teasing, making fun of, you saw this on... there was this [site] redtube, there was one where we used to tease people on Savita Bhabhi11, I don't think anyone went on that site, but we used to tease each other. The name Savita Bhabhi sounds very old, it is [an] older woman. We would say 'you are so horny that you jerk off to Savita Bhabhi'. That is an insult...If they did see, they didn't tell anyone. It was not the thing to see, it was old. If you sign on youtube with shemale you get everything there after a point. Most of my colleagues found out youtube was easiest. Type a scene of some movie, xyz actress, it was just age restricted. It took more bandwidth these sites, one of my friends figured out the bandwidth [to access these sites].

Kevin narrates how he was first introduced to pornography by his peers and how it came as a surprise. He repeatedly stresses on the fact that this ‘exposure’ was not scarring or shocking.

Guys used to play it [porn] their phones and show it. There was this guy who was famous because he introduced everyone to porn. [This was] around the eighth standard. We were in a group... he had the clip in the mobile. There is a bus stop [near] St Teresa's school... [we stood] behind the bus stop. There were five of us. He took out his phone. We were walking home from school... It was after an exam, we were free, we were walking and talking. [My] reaction was, 'Oh shit, where did you get this?' He said he downloaded it. I wasn't sure where to get it from. At that time I used to be ‘oh my god’, you should be a good boy. That was my first exposure to porn in video form, it was a little bit, it was not scarring or anything. It was like oh my god, this is a new thing. It was not scarring, it was not shocking that way. It was shocking like ‘oh crap’.

Anil who identifies as gay is not comfortable with sharing sexual jokes with most of his peers because of what he calls ‘their masculine tendencies’. While he does distance himself from them, he also recounts instances of watching porn with them.

There were many sexual jokes, starting from eighth and ninth standard. Personally I never felt inclined towards them because I never related to the kind of masculine tendencies my peers had. I identify myself as gay, so it was a bit difficult for me to be part of all the jokes... I also remember in tenth standard very clearly watching porn for the first time. That was on a farewell night. That time mobiles weren't there. We didn't have those android phones. No smart phones. Even in school we didn't have it. One of my friends had it and he brought it to the farewell night, then he said I want to show you something. There were eight to ten boys and amidst the party we went outside. He brought a phone and there was porn inside. First I

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11 Savita Bhabhi is an Indian pornographic cartoon character who is a ‘promiscuous’ housewife and engages in sexual encounters with a number of men when her husband is away. The comics were freely available on savitabhabhi.com before they were banned by the Indian Government. Subsequently they are available on kirtu.com. See Srivastava (2013b) for a detailed discussion of Savita Bhabhi, pornography, and modernity.
didn't know what was happening. It was a group eight to ten boys looking at porn. That was the first time I saw something happening and everybody was so excited look at it. Because in my time people weren't into internet, so these were really exciting things for us at that time. One of teachers came so we had to disperse, but of course the boys kept coming and they kept looking at it. That was my first incidence of watching porn.

Naresh, who describes himself as feminine, recounts painful incidents of being abused by other boys in his class. Unlike Anil, he found it hard to be part of the group of hyper-masculine boys in his school. These boys watched porn together and looked at magazines with pictures of naked women. Naresh recounts how he felt disgusted by this and actively distanced himself from this group. He found greater friendship with girls. On the other hand, Manish who spoke about his sexual attraction and love for boys when he was growing up, describes how most of the discussions among his peers centred on the male penis and not so much the woman’s breasts or vaginas. He found all this activity deliciously homoerotic and enjoyed it very much. Unlike the disembodied discussions of formal sex education, these discussions were very erotic and embodied; they dealt more with male bodies rather than female bodies. Like Ayan and Prakash’s narratives, Manish also talks about the relationship between pornography and masturbation. These conversations represent a certain inadequacy, of not being able to sustain an erection, or early ejaculation or of not having a long and thick enough penis. These are also conversations about the anxieties of masculine sexual performance. Adolescent boys’ discussions of sexuality and sex talk are not just predicated on misogynistic talk but also on failure to achieve a hegemonic masculine ideal.

Manish: During our growing years there was a lot of curiosity about penis size. Men would peep into each other, they would peep into the older boys, the older boys would flaunt their erect penises. There was a lot of curiosity and homoerotic activity in toilets. I would enjoy it thoroughly. There I was not an anomaly at all, (laughter) it was custom… and I particularly remember how tenth standard penises were talked about. His is thin, his is fatter than the other one's; he doesn't have a foreskin…

Ketaki: what were the other discussions around the body?

Manish: there were discussions around masturbation, penis size… [during] camp discussions. So uska launda bahut mota hai (his penis is very fat). Launda and lund were words for penis. So the girth and the length were things that were discussed like forever. Camp discussions would inevitably [be] porn centred and dick centred all the time. There was not so much of boobs and pussy. There was so much like dick dick dick dick… so [at] the camp [there] would be times where boys would ask other boys who they thought had long penises to also show them. It was much more homoerotic than I could imagine. It was crazy.

Ketaki: Would they feel each other?

Manish: [No], only watch. Feel[ing] each other would be another level, but watch for sure. There is this boy called Wrangler who according to my friends had the hugest cock. [My friends were like] “today we saw wrangler, oh we saw him yesterday”. (Laughter)... [or] “If he holds his dick in the hand, like it is a handful, a total handful” (laughter). There were concerns about how the foreskin [for] certain boys couldn't get pulled behind. That was painful ... There was a lot of masturbation talk. “Tumne kabhi hilaya hai? Kaise lagta hai? Aise lagta hai ki susu hota hai, par susu nahi hota hai, phir bitkul control nahi hota hai
uske upar phir jab BP dekhte hain tab ho hi jata hai.” (Have you masturbated? How does it feel? It feels like you want to urinate, but you can’t, then you can’t control. Then when you watch pornography, it happens). So there was a lot of [talk about] porn and masturbation in the ninth and tenth standard. [In the] eighth standard it was pubic hair “he is so dense and bushy.” It was a good thing to be dense and bushy, long and thick. It was good thing to be long, thick and easily movable foreskin. No foreskin was also not a good thing.

Ketaki: why was it not a good thing?

Manish: I don't know. It was not a good thing...a dick with a foreskin would always be a better dick... [there were] discussions about porn, different forms of porn, how the man would keep going on for hours. Like “hum hilate hain to turant nikal jata hai. Jaldi nikal jata hai. Porn dekh ke nikalte hain to ho hi jataa hai.” (When we masturbate we ejaculate so quickly, even if we watch porn and masturbate the semen comes out quickly). Then there were discussions around poses, postures, different positions: she was sitting on him, and then they did doggy style... different forms of porn were not discussed...

For Anil and Manish, who are both attracted to boys in schools but do not get along with the hegemonic and macho boys, the toilet becomes a highly sexualised space. Anil recounts how the toilet is a sexualised space.

[The] toilet was a very sexual space. There were figures drawn on the walls, and there were sexual jokes in the air. It was usually images of the penis. There were things they used to get excited with; they used to write those on the wall, all the slangs in Hindi and Marathi. I never did that. I used to feel a bit uncomfortable. I never went there really. They used to write these words, this was the way they used to relate to sex to be frank. These slangs are related to sex, which in a way made them excited about it. Talking about it made them more excited; like someone knew some new slang, if they learnt some new slang somewhere they used to come and discuss. But for me it was very different. I was always sincere, studious kind of a guy, doing his own work... the toilet was the most sexualised space in school.

During the course of the interview, Anil draws some of the graffiti present on the walls of the toilets in his school. He draws a woman’s face with a penis sticking out of her mouth. Manish also talks about the graffiti on the walls of the school toilets.

A lot of graffiti in the toilets would not have the boobs so much as the vagina. They would have a detailed drawing of the vagina with pubic hair. I very distinctly remember the vagina drawing. They [the drawings] were always there. [There were also a] lot of penis drawings. Beside a vagina, there would be a penis. There would always be like a penis... [with] hair... (loud laughter).

They [the vagina and the penis] were never in isolation; a vagina picture would never be there on its own, there would be a penis picture there, there would be maaderchod written, there would be bitch written, chutiya, lauda, ball. But there would never be breast drawings.

Manish’s discussions show how there is an obsession with not just the vagina but also how the penis was central to learning about sex and performing masculinity. From his previous narratives it is clear that the penis occupies an embodied way of talking about sex and creating a hierarchy amongst boys.

The other means of learning about sex was through peers and seniors. The young men discuss how important peer groups are to learning about sexuality. Kevin discusses the organic nature
of the conversations that happened with his seniors and friends, and how they were the sources of information.

Seniors [told us about sexuality] because they [were] one year [ahead of] us and all their experience. [They told us] things like masturbation and stuff... they used to tell us from their own experiences...these conversations happened during recess. In my locality, parish etc we used to play football in the evenings; some conversations would happen, if someone had a crush on someone...guys being guys would talk about everything.

Saras, who is awkward and shy, speaks gingerly about correct and incorrect information and how ‘good’ friends are essential to gaining ‘correct’ information. He is also the only one who discusses consent and says that he never knew sex was about mutual consent. When I asked him about what he would like sex education to be like, he stated that the only thing that needs to be taught is how not to objectify women and to be told about mutual consent within a sexual and romantic relationship.

Saras: I had a senior friend. I would just poke around and I expect him to answer, sometimes he would, sometimes he wouldn't.

Ketaki: What were the questions like?

Saras: Like, how do you approach a girl, [or] something about erection, growth of pubic hair. I had only one friend. Sometimes he would tell me, sometimes I waited. Everyone discussed... like how you jerk off. [It was] mainly discussing women, their chest areas and... we didn’t think about it as we do now...The talks were about women, about classmates, not actresses...

Ketaki: Were there people who had sexual information?

Saras: Everyone had something from somewhere, so they shared their own theories. I can’t think of another one right now. Gradually I realised that everyone had their own theories and they cannot be trusted. I came to know from the internet, from college friends. They explained on how to be protected against STDs. But [regarding] actual sex, is it mutual consent, I didn't know. [I] didn't know what was consent.

Ketaki: How did you come to know in junior college?

Saras: [Through] better friends. In the eleventh standard [through] the internet. I first watched porn in fourth standard. [I] was with friends and they were watching it and I didn't like it... I just left. It was shocking. That was the first time and basically then after maybe two or three years I began questioning him [the friend] about it. I got porn from him whenever I wanted. [But] I didn't know it [sex] was mutual consent.

It is unclear what Saras’ concept of mutual consent was, and how it was influenced by my presence. Krishna also discusses sex talk around pornography and how watching porn was a group activity. He also talks about how his girlfriend Sunanda was the most accurate source of sexual knowledge. This signals the intimacy that men feel with women and also how there is more playfulness in men’s discussions about sexuality amongst themselves, but how it might be more serious with a woman friend.

My friend showed me porn when I was in ... the fourth standard ... understanding would be a big word, [we were only] looking at it … We saw porn at home, when no one was there, then
we understood. My home was the adda (the den). They brought CDs … we knew we were up to something. We watched, enjoyed … with Sunanda (close female friend who was like his girlfriend) mostly sex education I got from her, about girls. I believe what we did in school was not sex education; that was mostly whatever we were seeing [porn], we were speaking that, we were blabbering that- we saw for one minute, spoke for ten minute[s]. [There was] no sense in that. [We spoke about] how you do it, they must be taking a pill … no that is silicon… [we were] discussing what we watching and referring to it… When I got [friendly] with Sunanda, when we were really close, then I used to just ask her, out of curiosity, I wanted to know… it is different when you speak with a guy; it is different when you speak with a girl. With a girl it is more serious and normal. With guys it is mostly everyone knows everything. I mostly was a listener in a group [of guys]. I was like: is it that way? And he was like "it is like this’…

Ketaki: With Sunanda did you feel the information was more correct?
Krishna: Yes! What can go wrong more? Ladki ke aage kya galat ho sakta hai (how can a girl be wrong?) … there can’t be a better source than her. I had a friend in college who said something, and then I repeated that to Sunanda and asked her about it. She said, ‘no it is not like that, you're mad. It is like this’...

Aditya discusses how he got sexual knowledge from his peers and how most of them were older than him. Like Krishna he also mentions how he got ‘trusted’ information from a woman.

[I got sexual knowledge from] my older friends. I grew up with a lot of older friends. My building neighbour, she was five years older. She is not the floozy head types or bimbo. She is academic and very generally knowledgeable. [I had] many doubts, not just sexuality, [that] she cleared up.

Shantanu discusses how conversations about women and actresses became an entry point to talking about sexuality. He gives the example about a conversation about the erotic thriller Basic Instinct and not a film from Bombay cinema. Most of the other young men I interviewed also spoke about transnational media texts like the television show Friends or films such as Basic Instinct as sources of sexual knowledge.

Even if a couple of kids get to know about sex they discuss it with the others and as kids about fourteen-fifteen years of age we don't have much idea, so we are more thrilled and more excited to know about these things… we had a fairly good idea, we almost knew everything, even before it was taught in school… [The sources of information] were mostly friends. It was a continuous process, little pieces of information from here and there. For e.g. for masturbation, I was pretty late amongst my friends [to know] about it… In the ninth [there was] basically a discussion amongst friends, [about] masturbation. I had no idea; they explained how guys perform masturbation. Some of them must have… [seen] sex scenes in Hollywood movies. Some of my friends have watched those Hollywood movies so they are discussing what the actors [do] and about sex in the movies...

Ketaki: Do you recall any discussion and conversation?

Shantanu: [They] were discussing about actresses: Sharon Stone [in] Basic Instinct. That is the way the conversation started, from Sharon Stone to the erotic thriller [Basic Instinct] and from there to the couple of sex scenes in the movies… The discussion is from the actress [to the] movie and [from] there [to] a couple of sex scenes and … they might even discuss the process of how...

Ketaki: Did particular people have sexual knowledge?
Shantanu: Most of us had by the eighth and ninth standard… [The] students who are considered naughtier will have the knowledge first and then they will disseminate it to the other students and there are always five or six students who disseminate that knowledge to the rest of the students.

Ketaki: What kind of knowledge?

Shantanu: One of them [was on] masturbation for example, [or] what happens in sex, about the different movies that are erotic thrillers… [in] discussions around pornography [it was] various sites and various categories of porn. Some would like [to watch a] normal couple, some would like MILF, some would like domination…

Ketaki: Was talking about the actress the entry point to sex?

Shantanu: Yes, one of the ways.

Ketaki: Did they speak from personal experience?

Shantanu: I don't think anyone in school had personal experience. They were too young to have it… People used to have a girlfriend, but that was basically dating, nothing.

Ketaki: The information about sexuality didn't come from personal experience?

Shantanu: No, it came mostly through videos… the best thing about discussing with friends is that you don't feel ashamed. Even if you are discussing with parents you might feel awkward. [With] friends it is common; you can ask them any weird thought.

Shantanu also underlines how learning from peers was easiest since ‘you don’t feel ashamed’. The comfort of discussing sexuality with peers cannot be discounted. Shantanu also discusses how his friends did not rely on personal experience but on videos to learn about sexuality. This is largely because most of them did not have much ‘personal experience’. Though my interviewees denied personal experiences, this runs parallel to Louisa Allen’s (2001) study of the hierarchies of sexual knowledge where most adolescents valued personal experiences over school based sexuality education.

In the narratives above one notes the importance of the peer group in discussions about sexuality. This also includes gossip, talking about pornography, cinema, television, about other people’s relationships and also learning from graffiti in the toilets. While some of these conversations are about media texts and gossip, others are more embodied: about the penis, about masturbation, about pubic hair. Peer sexual knowledge is transnational, often misogynistic, and also structures masculinities. While some of the sex talk presents anxieties about male sexual performance, other kinds of peer talk demonstrate that the classroom is not the site for sexual knowledge. Sex education is viewed as un-necessary since the boys feel that they ‘already know’ what is necessary. While this is not objectively true from an adult perspective, this is true from the subjective experiences of these adolescent boys. Any discussion on sexual knowledge outside the classroom cannot simplistically dismiss these as ‘inaccurate’ or ‘inadequate’ but must also understand the life-world of adolescent male sexual knowledge. This life-world is structured by masculine desires of omniscience, anxieties of
sexual performance, embodied knowledge of the genitals, misogynistic attitudes towards women, and a hierarchy of access to sexual knowledge.

**Circulation of Sexual Knowledge**

Most of the young men stated how the circulation of sexual knowledge was through trading pornographic material in CDs or pendrives. Atul notes that “during the break, we pass around pendrives with movies. They are downloaded from the net.” The exchange of CDs required not only a network of friends, but also knowledge of encoding. CDs which contained pornographic videos had the names of computer games or movies written on them. For instance Jerry recounts that after burning a CD, boys would write MotorCross Madness (a computer game) on the cover. This was a way to conceal the circulation of pornography from teachers and parents. Circulation of pornography required that one knew that MotorCross Madness or XXX stood for porn. Pratik recounts an incident where a boy was unaware of this encoding and believed that the CD he was given contained a movie.

One of my best friends was quite naïve. He was actually tricked into taking a CD that was actually a pornographic CD. So he started watching it at home, when he realised that this wasn’t a movie and he had to (laughter) switch his screen off and take the CD out, he was quite livid about that (more laughter). His parents [were] at home…So there was this huge concern about what if his mother got to know about it. He wouldn’t [borrow] CDs after that.

The fear of getting caught was a real anxiety and secrecy had to be maintained at all costs. Farhad describes the risks of keeping pornography at home. He points out that he wouldn’t exchange any material because of the risks involved. It was safer to discuss about pornography or exchange the names of a website. Farhad notes how if he had five CDs at home, the sixth one would be conspicuous. Keeping a magazine was also risky. There couldn’t be any proof about keeping any pornographic material at home. Pratik also describes the dangers of exchanging sexually explicit material in the classroom. The risks of this exchange were minimised through concealing CDs or magazines in newspapers or books.

Kevin, Manish and Krishna discuss the circulation of pornography and other sexually explicit material amongst the boys in school. Kevin mentions that “[The circulation was from] bag to bag. [This included] music, pendrives, games; everyone [was] into gaming… we ... exchange[d] under the desk.” Manish talks about “CDs [being] exchanged. There were no pendrives. They would talk about how they go home early and the time in between their bai (domestic worker) coming in and cleaning their home and leaving and parents coming is like porn time. Friends would also meet at other friends place. It could be a group activity. Masturbation was never a group activity.” Like Manish, Krishna and his friends also
exchanged CDs in school and went to each others’ houses to watch pornography: “Everyone brought porn in their bag and we have to go to everyone's house; we are all sitting and watching porn in someone's house. [We] exchanged CDs in school. No one checked our bags; we burned CDs, or got them at the station.”

Pratik also describes the dangers of exchanging sexually explicit material in the classroom. The risks of this exchange were minimised through concealing CDs or magazines in newspapers or books. Similar concerns of circulation and secrecy are raised in Balak Palak and Hunterr (2015). In Balak Palak the four friends have to mediate the risks of borrowing a pornographic video from the Holy Video Palace. They have to ensure that the video palace owner does not reveal their identity to their families, that the money to borrow the video is done under the pretext of a festival and that no one is at home when they watch the video. They also read the pornographic magazines, supplied by Vishu, in secrecy in the bathroom, in the bedroom, outside the house, and have to hide the magazines in secret places like drainage pipes. Similarly in Hunterr (2015) the adolescent protagonist Mandar Ponkshe secretly goes to watch Hawas Ki Rani (The Queen of Desire) playing in a small room in Mumbai in the 1990s. When the police raids the show, Mandar tries to save himself by lying that he mistook it to be a children’s film. The policeman threatens to tell his parents that he was watching pornography. When Mandar refuses to reveal his identity and his parents’ address, the policeman orders that half of Mandar’s hair on this head be shaved off as a form of punishment.

Pornographic CDs are not the only sexually explicit materials circulated. Newspapers in the library are also sources of information about sexuality and are shared by friends. Anil recounts a long incident about the collective reading of Dr Mahindra Watsa’s Sexpert column in the Mumbai Mirror. This incident tells us what kind of sexual knowledge is valuable and how despite having access to information regarding diseases and contraception, adolescents often fails to retain that information. Anil explains that this is because he learnt and remembered the erotic aspects of his readings rather than the facts. He read the Sexpert column for excitement rather than information.

I remember in eighth standard the Mumbai Mirror had the Sexpert column. I was a studious chap, I used to go the library and read books, so I chanced upon this Sexpert column; I started reading it. Slowly my friends got hold of it. So we had four to five friends who used to sit around this one Mumbai Mirror column and read it, and we used to get excited about it, and we used to talk about it. It was that twenty minutes of excitement we got everyday in the library. But then after a month or so the librarian caught us doing that and then it was stopped. The column, the page was taken out, and it stopped. I didn't stop going to the library ... Every day we used to go there and read those columns. The questions, we used to imagine and get excited by it. So for instance the questions we used to imagine is ‘oh there is a thirty year old man, and there is a woman who is twenty eight and both are married’, or there is some extra...
marital affair going on, or some person has this problem. And there were points where he [Dr Watu] talks about ejaculation, or orgasm, or not ejaculating ... these things make them [the boys] excited. We used to talk about it afterwards. Those were a distinct group... so they used to go back home and masturbate, and they used to talk about it [the next] morning, or they used to say, did we ejaculate better or whatever.

Ketaki: What exactly did the librarian do?

Anil: there were five or six people who used to come every to read the Sexpert column, and there was this one Mumbai Mirror. We used to crowd around it, and we used to read and boys used to laugh. And the librarian used to sit in a corner, she didn't come to know. At times she used to walk around, and then we... we used to do our own work. We used to come back and crowd in and read it again. At one point of time, she came and walked around, from the back. And she looked, and she realised what we were doing. Then she was like ‘oh no you can't read that, you are not supposed to read that’. We sat on them and kept it away. That was the first instance. The second day again there were four boys, and again we were reading it, and then she took the paper on the second day and she tore the page and kept it away. Then we went away. From the next day, after that incident, when I started looking at the paper, that page was not there, at all. And the boys didn't come in then. There was no page. And I used to do my own work at that time. At least for a year that page was not there. They used to tear it every day.

My image was [was that of a] sincere chap who was silent, docile. She [the librarian] used to tell me, ‘why do you encourage such things, why do you read this?’ I said ‘no Ma’am, I read the newspaper. I come here to read the paper and do my own work’. She thought I was the good boy. She said ‘you can't read that’. It was so stupid, as if nobody reads the paper at home... The Sexpert column wasn't in the genre of... we weren't learning anything from the Sexpert. It was for excitement... it was not for information, it was all for excitement.

Ketaki: What was the information?

Anil: For me information means learning something about sex: the pictures in the boys’ toilet, films of the acts of sex, like kissing and by talking. The Sexpert column was in a way an excitement where someone was talking explicitly about it, in a public forum.

Ketaki: Weren't you all also talking explicitly?

Anil: We were talking explicitly. But in Sexpert column it is more clinical. We were not using those words, the excitement was... Sexpert was in a way exciting because we found something in the public dimension which was more relatable because it was [about] personal experiences.

Ketaki: How is it that the Sexpert column was not information?

Anil: I will give you an example. If the Sexpert said ‘use condoms’, the condom would become an exciting part and the awareness why to use condoms was not there. So we never stressed on the usage of condoms because we have to practice safe sex. Condoms are exciting, colourful, it is something related to sex. These were some of the loopholes which gave it away. So even if there was information there, I wouldn't deny that. We learnt different things. It was selectively used, like using lubrication. The use of lubrication becomes exciting, why you use, what you use for, falls off. [For instance we used to think] ‘the use of lubrication, wow, and you have sex and you use lubrication, oh wow how does it feel to use lubrication ... even if we are reading it doesn't get registered. Most of it just falls off. [We] pick up words, lubrication, condom, becomes exciting for me.

Ketaki: The column must be also talking about diseases.

Anil: Ya ya, HIV and AIDs. HIV again it was talked about but it was not stressed on... so there were boring questions, and there were exciting [questions like] lubrication, use of condoms, extra marital affair, premature ejaculation, the length of the penis: all of this was
anything to do with the body, or the genitals, or sex with lubrication was exciting. The boring ones were the technical ones, like HIV/AIDS. Anything disease related was boring. We used to skip those questions.

Ketaki: Were questions around relationships and romance exciting?

Anil: Yes, that was exciting. I remember magazines like Debonair, Cosmopolitan on one hand and there were these fifteen Rupees or ten Rupees porn magazines. …On the cover page they had porn pictures, and they had porn stories in Hindi… They used to get it from station … this was also a very important source of information on sex, all these sexual stories… These porn magazines were in Hindi, with explicit sexual stories, but different stories: incest, romance, brother sister… those were the first sources of sexual knowledge that we got.

Anil’s long narrative about learning and erotic excitement in the library points to the difference between information about diseases and information about the erotics of sexuality: condoms, lubrication, relationships, stories about sex and so on. Information about HIV and other diseases are boring, clinical and too technical. Anil’s narrative points out that even if he read about condoms and lubrication, what he retained was the excitement of the words and the acts rather than clinical facts of protection. He and his friends also skipped the parts about diseases and were more interested in narratives and stories about sex rather than ‘clinical facts’. Allen (2006) similarly argues that young men’s talk about pornography in the classroom is a call for making the sex education curriculum more erotic. She reads young men’s calls to include more ‘pornography in schools as “a means of transgressing school authority by pushing at the symbolic boundaries which regulate sexuality in this context. Such remarks also offer a means of constituting masculine identity as active, virile, and powerful… In addition, young men’s statements offer a critique of sexuality education that is de-eroticaized, and a schooling context that denies young people as legitimate and positive sexual subjects’ (Allen 2006: 80). This points to us not only the missing discourse of erotics in formal sexuality education, but also that learning is selective and can happen in such a way that it frustrates formal education’s desire of linear learning. Even when Anil and his friends read about safe sex and lubrication, the information about safe sex falls off and all they remember are the words condom, lubrication and the excitement of imagining sexual activity.

One sees that in all these cases the circulation and viewing of pornographic material- printed or video- have to be done in secrecy. Despite being male and having greater access to pornography than girls, these adolescents strongly fear the risks of being caught and punished by their families. Elsewhere I have discussed the risks that adult women face while viewing online pornography (Chowkhani, 2016b). Like adolescent males, adult women too have to watch pornography in secrecy and constantly fear getting caught. For adult women the risks seem greater, since it can undermine their respectability, construct them as frustrated and sexually available leaving them vulnerable to different forms of violence and punishment.
One of the chief anxieties that parents, schools, the media, civil society and the State experience about adolescent sexual knowledge is the consumption of pornography by boys. I would like to briefly comment on that. Liza Tsaliki writes that “assumptions about the harmful influence of porn on young people stem from a tradition of ‘media effects’ that has been recently revitalized by concerns about the proliferation of online pornography.” (Tsaliki 2011: 293). Tsaliki’s study of children’s and adolescents’ use of pornography in Greece concludes that there is “no particular reason for concern regarding young people’s exposure to sexually explicit content” and that “while a small number of young people are clearly offended by porn that they encounter, there is no evidence to suggest that they are harmed by it.” (Tsaliki 2011: 299). Scholars are also beginning to examine the use of pornography as a pedagogic tool and think about ‘porn literacy’ for adolescents within the classroom (Albury 2014). But as Kath Albury (2014) notes, there is no consensus on what pornography can do for education. Some argue that pornography promotes aggressive views towards women while “other researchers and commentators have sought to question the link between young people’s consumption of sexually explicit material and their actual sexual behaviours (McKee 2010; Hald et al. 2013)” (Albury 2014: 174). Alan McKee (2007, 10-11) notes that for adolescent males pornography acts as rite of passage and a social practice. The interviewees in my study also discuss pornography as a social practice and how it becomes central to peer group discussions around sex12. While all these studies discussed above are located in a different socio-cultural context, we cannot make any conclusive arguments on the consumption of pornography by adolescent males in India yet, since that would require further research and is outside the scope of this research.

A brief note on the debate on pornography is important to contextualise further research. The most marked pornography debate happened during the Barnard Conference on the Politics of Sexuality in 1982 in the United States. The conference brought together theorists who wanted to “expand the analysis of pleasure” without discounting or ignoring the dangers of sexuality and violence. The conference aimed at theorising pleasure for women. This brought a public onslaught where the anti-pornography, WAP (Women Against Pornography) brigade staged a public protest. This conference marked the debate on pornography and sexual violence.

12 In the last few years, popular media has reported a number of stories where young men have gang-raped minor girls after watching pornography. One such case was reported in New Delhi in 2013 and has again given rise to the causality between watching of pornography and rape. There was an anxiety around porn during the wake of the Shakti Mills gangrape because porn was used and shown to the victim during the rape. See Agnes et al (2014) for more details.
The anti-censorship and sex-positive position espoused by Rubin and Vance among others, argues against the anti-porn movement which is espoused by McKinnon and Dworkin. The latter argue that there is an intimate relationship between pornography, rape and women’s subjugation. They maintain the pornography is the theory and rape the practice. The former maintain that looking for an end to violence against women by ending porn is not the solution. The problem of violence is structural; it is embedded in structures of family, state, religion and not in representations of sexually explicit material like pornography. What needs to be addressed is the sexism in porn, the right to sex education and not the elimination of porn as a whole. They argue that the anti-porn movement has taken strong images of sexuality which might not be very familiar to women and strong feelings about rape and violence and abuse and conflated the two and said they are the same thing. Looking at the industry of the representation of sexual fantasy, Gayle Rubin maintains that Harlequin romance novels reproduce gender hierarchy, but no one takes to the streets to protest against them. Sado/masochism (S/M) porn is mostly about fantasies and the category of those who read and watch S/M sex and the category of rapists is very different (Rubin 1982).

Gayle Rubin and Carole Vance, the organisers of the conference thought that it was important to speak about women’s sexual pleasure because without it one ran the danger of perpetually placing female sexuality within the domain of danger and victimhood, and not allowing space for other forms of experiences, especially desire. The position that feminists took to examine the politics of female sexuality was to see how sexuality was more complex than just associating it with danger and humiliation. It involved both pleasure and danger, not in black and white terms but with an intermixture which was both temporal and spatial. Vance argued that pleasure and its acknowledgement becomes a tool for empowerment. In the Indian context, scholars like Ghosh (1999) and Bose (2006) have argued against censorship, especially of sexually explicit materials.

**Concluding Remarks**

The sexual knowledge that I have explored in the sections above is not codified like formal sexuality education. This sexual knowledge is also based on interpretation. For instance swear words and sexual jokes are surrounded by ambiguity and don’t always convey clear meanings about sex. Metaphors also add to the ambiguity around sex. The circulation of pornographic CDs is shrouded by secrecy and codes, and symbols such as XXX and MotorCross Madness have to be correctly interpreted. Formal sexuality education on the other hand is based on clarity, and unambiguous meanings where there is not supposed to be any scope for
interpretation. The effort of formal sexuality education is to remove the ambiguity of meanings around sex. Jen Gilbert (2004) discusses this desire of formal sexuality education at length: “Moran (2000) argues that the history of sex education is a history of response to the ambiguity of language. If information about sexuality can produce sexually responsible adolescents, it was the language of science, apparently neutral and value-free, that would demystify sexuality. Early sex educators believed the silences of Victorianism compelled young people to be curious about each other’s bodies. This curiosity could therefore be satisfied and thus eradicated through the presentation of scientific fact. If adolescents ‘‘knew’’ about sex and were able to discuss sex openly with knowledgeable peers and adults, they would be less inclined to experiment. In most cases, knowledge meant information about the devastating effects of venereal disease, i.e., having the right words to name the wrong actions. Language, as a medium for scientific thought, was meant to instil fear and cure curiosity” (Gilbert 2004: 120).

What is important in Gilbert’s quote above is the idea of formal sexuality education as a ‘cure [to] curiosity’. In my discussion of adolescents’ sexual knowledge, I have noted how curiosity does not necessarily lead to sexual knowledge. Rather it is ‘rites of passage’ and the mere fact of being part of peer groups which often leads one to acquire sexual knowledge. One could also ask why curiosity needs to be cured at all and if scientific language is necessarily the ‘best’ way to ‘cure’ it. The other idea in Gilbert’s quote is that ambiguity in language needs to be replaced with meanings that are more ‘certain’ and scientific. Feminists have been concerned with the limits of scientific discourse and the ways in which it has ignored or streamlined women’s experiences or voices. In advocating for a sexuality education based on a language of science and rationality, we come face to face with the dilemmas of acknowledging adolescent sexual knowledge as ambiguous and the adult desires to impart ‘scientific’ knowledge about sex. Formal sexuality education whether formulated by the State or by feminist organisations cannot escape the ‘trap’ of the scientific discourse. Apart from it being ‘scientific’, formal sexuality education also becomes an alibi of adult desires for the adolescent.

Historically too, sex education in India has emerged out of a concern for a ‘scientific’ discourse. Sanjam Ahluwalia (2013), commenting on Indian sexologist A.P. Pillay’s interest in sex education in 1944, writes: “What we see at work is the very act of transforming sex into specialised knowledge, which needed guidance and training from an early age. Parents,

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13 AP Pillay was also closely connected in the formation of the Family Planning Association of India (FPAI) and served as honorary medical advisor.
teachers, and doctors, were identified as ideally suited to impart sexual knowledge to children. What was being unleashed was a global project aimed at defining and shaping sexual desires and pleasures, albeit, in a *controlled manner* through reliance on sexual experts” (Emphasis mine, 40-41). It is clear that the official discourse, however comprehensive, is always already ‘controlled’, while the unofficial discourse allows for relatively more ‘free-play’ in defining sexuality and desires.

I do not question the need for formal sexuality education, but rather seek to problematize the centrality it has acquired over all other forms of sexual knowledge. If we place the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ discourses of sex education side by side rather than in a hierarchy, what we achieve is not just a process of decentring but also an erasure of the idea of ‘gap’ itself, turning on its head the notion of a ‘knowledge gap’. The disappearance of this ‘gap’ means that while these two discourses do and can overlap, the ‘unofficial discourse’ need not always occupy the space of the classroom. This means that while formal sexuality education tries to engage with pornography through ‘porn literacy’ or discusses swear words in the classroom, or even tries to eroticise the curriculum by bringing it closer to adolescents lives, the thrill of peer group discussions, the prohibitive excitement of using swear words, gossip about friends and their girlfriends cannot really enter the formal space of the classroom. The ‘unofficial’ discourse is based on prohibition, secrecy, thrill and ambiguity, all of which seem indispensable in acquiring knowledge. The classroom is not structured for these modes of learning and acquiring knowledge. This means that formal sexuality education, while engaging with adolescent experiences, cannot be entirely ‘comprehensive’ and holistic. The limits of the classroom demand that it engage with only a restricted ‘official’ discourse, acknowledging that this can be only a *part* and not the *whole* of sexual knowledge.