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## It's time to get real

The first time I felt the full force of sexual jealousy, I was a gangly 14-year-old watching my crush of the month lean over to take a bite of her boyfriend's ice-lolly. I have no memory of what she looked like, but I can still feel the sheer intimacy of the gesture (I was, I think, too innocent to read obscenity into it) taking my breath away for just long enough that a kite circling overhead could swoop down to snatch the sandwich from my temporarily limp hands.

I don't always agree with Mamata Banerjee but I don't see what's so bizarre (as the headline of the India Blooms news story reporting on her statement insists) about her suggestion that the recent rash of rapes in India has something to do with public displays of intimacy far more graphic than the one that so upset me. There are few forces more powerful than sexual desire and few forms of inequality more palpable than inequality of access to sex: all the rich guys, to a first approximation, get all the pretty girls, at least if pretty is what Bollywood (or Hollywood) tells us it should be.

Having that inequality being thrown at your face, day in and day out, by a language of the body that leaves little to the imagination, cannot possibly be pleasant if you happen to be on the wrong side of that divide.

None of this should be read as a defence of rape — I cannot imagine that there can be one — or even as a criticism of the shift in sexual mores. I am happy that we have a less repressed society than the one I (and Banerjee) grew up in. But it highlights the fact that there are more forms of inequality to worry about than just money.

What are we doing as a society to reduce inequality of access to sex? I don't mean publicly provided brothels — though those are not unknown in history — but just the right to a normal conjugal life. If you are poor in urban India or even middle class and 25, you have to be very lucky to have a room of your own in the family home, let alone a separate apartment that you can call your own. I remember walking home from our mutual adda one evening some 30 years ago in Kolkata with an acquaintance who lived somewhere in the neighbourhood, feeling slightly puzzled when he stopped on the way to have one more cup of tea before he went home. It was late, past dinner time so I, naively, asked, "Tea this late?". He hesitated for a moment and then explained — he goes home after everyone else has eaten because there is no place to sit or sleep till they have all had dinner and gone to bed and the dining area is vacated. He was substantially older than me, perhaps 25 and had some kind of job, but clearly there was no way he could afford to get married — where would they sit together, where would they sleep?

Every evening millions of young men like him all over India stand at the street corners or huddle in tea-stalls till it is time for them to occupy their sleeping spot in the one or two tiny rooms that their family occupies. They watch their coevals go by with their wives or girlfriends, holding hands or cuddling, fortunate because their parents were rich enough that they had a place to go to and be intimate with each other. Do they think of sex and how impossible it is for them to get married? Probably.

A lot of this inequality, at least in our urban areas, is a direct result of our policies. We pay lip service to low-income urban housing, but do nothing about it beyond insisting that tiny pockets of high income neighbourhoods get set aside for smaller and cheaper flats, which are usually just too lucrative to end up with the genuinely poor. At the same time we make sure that most houses can be no taller than a few storeys in a fruitless pursuit of some idealised garden city (is Defence Colony in Delhi a garden city or the world's most expensive slum?). We don't build enough roads, and our urban public transport, with some notable exceptions, makes sure that commuting is a nightmare.

All of this conspires to keep the land values in central cities absurdly high and our poor huddled in their hovels. No political party in India lobbies for high-rises because every one of them has a stake in keeping those land prices in the stratosphere — in my old neighbourhood in Kolkata, the municipal councillor (who is from Banerjee's party), is reputed to get a share of anything that gets built.

None of this, I must repeat, has anything to do with condoning rape. When the khap panchayats talk about getting everyone married at 16, they want to "solve" the problem of sexual desire (not how they put it, but that's what they are talking about), as they always have, by putting "society's" interests above that of young women (and men). But that does not mean we do not have a problem.

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**The views expressed by the author are personal**

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