

Culture, Sexualities, and Identities

men who have sex with men in South Asia

June 1996

(This essay arises from a specific context of working with sexual health issues amongst men who have sex with men in South Asia, where HIV/AIDS has become an urgent issue. But there is very little work being done amongst gay-identified men and men who have sex with men. The epidemic has been defined as "heterosexual", with immense levels of denial around the existence of "homosexuality". Why? With historical evidence for homosexual behaviours and contemporary anecdotal evidence indicating very high levels of male-to-male sexual encounters, what is being denied? Is appropriate language being used to define such behaviours? And in the context of South Asia are all male-to-male sexual behaviours definers of homosexuality?)

Prem is 26, married with a young son. He works in a large family business in Calcutta, where his family are prominent members of Calcutta society. He has fond memories of his first sexual experience with another boy at the age of 13. He has continued to have sex with other men, even after his marriage, albeit less frequently because of the lack of opportunity. His sexual interactions with other men have always been fleeting, "pick-ups". He has never wanted to form a relationship with another man because this would increase the risks of discovery for him. Such a discovery would be disastrous for him in terms of his family and his social standing. He would prefer not to be married. He doesn't love his wife, but feels he performs his husbandly duties adequately.

Islam is an auto-rickshaw driver in Pune where he lives in one of the small shanty villages on the outskirts of the industrial area. He is married with four children. He says that sometimes he just has to go out and find a man to have sex with it, although he is happy with his wife. This usually happens about once every two months, and he feels that he can't control his desire for this. He finds men at the many contact points around the city. He doesn't call himself a homosexual; the word gay he doesn't understand, not having access to English. Nor does he see anything wrong in what he does. He is just "messing about". The terms homosexual or bisexual cannot refer to him he believes because he is happily married with children. He remembers his first sexual experience with his uncle back in his home village. He was 12.

Arjit, 19 years old is a student in New Delhi University studying English literature, and is from a well-to-do family in the Diplomatic Service. He calls himself gay, and

would like to "come out" to his family, but he is deeply concerned about their possible reaction and rejection of him. They might cut him out of the family and he would lose everything! He has always known about himself ever since he can remember, always attracted to other boys. His first experience with another boy was when he was 11. Now he visits the various "gay" haunts around New Delhi where he can find "plenty of action".

Ranjan is a male prostitute, a young man of 16 who plies his "business" in Central Madras near the railway station. He has done this since he was 13, when he had run away from home because of the beatings of his father. He never wants to go back home. He says that he enjoys his "work" because it gives him a lot of money, even though sometimes his clients are rough. He is saving money to buy a small business. He doesn't call himself a homosexual, even though he enjoys the sex. It is only business.

Mohammed, 42, is married with three children and works in a hotel in Pune. He visits a local female prostitute once a month after payday. He also has sex with some of the male guests and other staff at the hotel. He says, " I am always 'hot'. I want a girl, but they're too expensive. So when I am hot and I don't have enough money, then I know several men who I can have *maasti* with. A lot of my friends do this."

Arun lives with his lover Kamal near a railway station in Bombay. They have lived together as lovers for the last five years. Both work as municipal sweepers. That is how they met. Both have had sex with other men prior to their meeting. They say they want to stay together as lovers. They don't consider themselves as different. They know many men who enjoy sex with other men. They don't play husband and wife roles, thinking it rather silly as both are men. Neither read nor speaks English. They both left school at 13.

Discussions around heterosexuality, bisexuality and homosexuality, "straight" or "gay", appear to form clear-cut distinctions in terms of sexual behaviours and identities. The lesbian and gay "movement" has been globalised and in South Asia, localised groups have been established, particularly in India, with Bombay Dost, Sakhi, G.A.Y, Counsel Club, Friends India. In Nepal there is the Nepal Queer Society, in Sri Lanka, Companions on a Journey, and in Pakistan, Alliance for Bright Citizens. Many cities in the region have established social networks of lesbians and of gay men with specific sexual "cruising" sites. And yet the debate is more often than not in English, with Western terminology and understandings.

Western terms are bandied about without clarity and understanding, and without reference to local cultures or vernacular languages. So who is a homosexual? Who is lesbian or gay? Or as they say in India, who is a gay? The unthought through assumption is often that same-gender sexual behaviours must mean the person is a homosexual, while male to female behaviour must mean that the person is a heterosexual. And in this construct, procreative "heterosexuality" is seen as normative. However such constructs have very little contemporary or historical validity in South Asia (and even so in the West). This reductionist ideology is a recent invention from the 19th century, which consequently acted to reduce the rich diversity of alternate sexualities. Closer analysis indicates a confusion between sexual behaviours, genders, identity formation, and cross-cultural validity. Within such confusion there may also elements of neo-colonialism, racism, and Western imperialism. I am not arguing that there are no lesbian or gay identities in South Asia. What I am putting forward is that too often language and terminology is used inadequately outside the cultural context. In South Asia, over 80% of the population have no access to English! So transcribing terms becomes host to misunderstanding, inappropriate terminology, and in consequence, particularly with reference to HIV/AIDS work, South Asian countries can state there is no homosexuality. This leads to the proposition that there is no "homosexual" behaviour, which therefore means there needs to be no investment in HIV prevention programmes for men who have sex with men.

This debate is particular urgent in our countries, where the taboo on any public (and very often private) debate on sexual behaviours is extremely strong, where behaviours and identities are constructed within differing cultural frameworks, and where Euro-American understandings of lesbian and gay identities are only just beginning to be imagined, emerge and develop. But in what form? For whom? In what context? And in what language?

The debate can be perceived as a form of sexual neo-colonialism whereby South Asian discourses on sexuality, by professionals, laypersons, "straights" or "gays", have been "invaded" by Western sexual ideologies with our own histories being discounted. What we as South Asian "lesbians" and "gay" men are often do, particularly within the South Asian Diaspora, is to try to fit South Asian sexual and cultural histories as well as contemporary behaviours and identities into a Western sexuality discourse. Thus we have the North American discourses on South Asian "Queer" histories by South Asian lesbians and gay men living there. This often means that we urgently seek "evidence" for a lesbian and gay history within South Asia itself to validate ourselves living outside of South Asia.

And our histories are replete with "evidence". Mughal (15th century onwards) paintings and poetry are explicitly homoerotic, men with men, women with women. There is an abundance of temple carvings and iconography that show same-sex sexual behaviours. Konark, Khajarahah and other sites become places of pilgrimage for the lesbian or gay man. The finger points. Here is the evidence. Yes there were lesbians and gay men in our past! But the constructions of these identities are never discussed. We extrapolate from the present into the past. They must have been like us, lived like us, and had the same understanding and meanings as we do. This is particularly dangerous within South Asia in the current climate of anti-West rhetoric and the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. We shouldn't need validation based on the past. Our existence is our own validation. However, the basis of this lies in the conflation of sexual behaviour with a sexual identity, but for the majority of men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women, these notions of sexuality are considerably less significant than the often clear distinctions between concepts of "active" and "passive", of concepts of "discharge" or "pleasure and desire", of even "real sex"(in marriage between husband and wife, where sex is defined by procreation and duty) and "maasti" (between same sex friends, where sex is defined as play and therefore not "real"). None of these frameworks can be understood within the Western lesbian or gay constructions. Most "active" partners in same-sex interactions do not necessarily consider themselves either as homosexuals, or as gays or lesbians, or even as bisexuals. What they do does not necessarily have significance to who they are.

The act of sexual penetration is not so much a definer of identity, but one of phallic power. The "penetrator" can maintain a sense of "manliness", while the "penetrated" will be seen as "not-man". In the contemporary debates in South Asia, to a large extent, homosexuality is being defined as "not being a man" as being sexually penetrated. This is based on an assumption that exclusive anal intercourse is the behavioural definition of homosexuality and that the exclusive vaginal intercourse is the definer of heterosexuality. Of course what is forgotten that non-penetrative sex plays a substantial role in same-sex sexual behaviours and that for many women, they often have to bear anal penetration by men also. At the same time, the concept of homosexual identity becomes intertwined with sexual behaviour rather than with psychological states of being and desire.

In South Asia a specific social and culturally based group, the "Hijras", have often been defined as transsexuals, transvestites and even as "passive" homosexuals. Of course none of these identity descriptions are particularly valid. Hijras, men who dress up in clothing defined as female, where some have been castrated for religious

and cultural reasons, who act out a "woman's" role, have religious, social and cultural roles in South Asian societies where such roles are defined as "not man" and "not woman", a "third gender". While desire, poverty, pre-adolescent sexual penetration by older men in adolescence, and so on may all play roles in such a person making the choice to become hijras, the framework is too complex to be reduced to transvestite, transsexual or homosexual.

Similar, the whole region of Asia has had a history of the sexual construction of post-pubertal boys. Young boys are not men, nor are they women who often are not sexually available, and have been historically defined as sexual objects to be desired and penetrated by men. The "beardless youths" of much Arab and Mughal literature reflects such a construction and practice, a practice that still continues to some extent.

It is not uncommon for both "active" and "passive" male partners to engage in sexual relations with women, to be married with children, as well as having sex with other men. This does not mean that all same-sex relationships fall into this characteristic of "active" and "passive" role/stereotype activity. Much same-sex sexual activity is around non-penetrative varieties, mutually indulged in frameworks of friendship and sexual play, whilst in other situations urgent sexual discharge is the significant factor. Indeed same-sex sexual behaviour may play a relatively insignificant role in the construction of an identity. Being a husband, a father, a wife or mother, often carries greater weight.

In South Asia, a person's position in the joint and extended family, marriage and children, are central to social definition and personal identity. Family, social and cultural pressures for marriage and children are intense. In that sense "procreative heterosexuality" can be seen as a social compulsion and as a familial and community duty. Where there may be men who would prefer to form sexual relationships and partnerships with other men they would still feel obliged to marry and produce children to honour family and community obligations. Such men will look outside the marriage for sexual and emotional fulfilment. Similarly in other contexts, with marital sex seen as duty, sex outside marriage (for men!) becomes a source of pleasure and discharge. The fluidity of many South Asian male's sexual experience and behaviour reflects the socio-cultural frameworks in which they live.

Sexual invisibility, gender segregation, joint and extended families, homosociability and homoaffectionalism, male ownership of public space, shame cultures, community *izzat* or honour, compulsory marriage and procreation, gender constructions where male and female roles are based upon duty and obligations as much as upon biology,

and where adulthood is as much defined by duty as well as age, and so on, frame South Asian cultures and therefore identities.

Gender identities, sexual roles and thus personal identities, arise within the context of specific psychosocial, cultural, religious and historical dynamics. Perceptions of who we are, what we are and what we do will therefore have different meanings within different cultures. Within South Asian cultures, personal identities are not based on a belief of the personal self, but rather of being a member of a joint and extended family with all the duties and obligations bound to each individual within that network. Such a family network consists of siblings, biological parents, uncles, aunts, brother and sister-in-laws, all their resultant children, and so on. In other words, who we are arises from where we are in the extended family network and what family obligations and duties that creates. The person has a family and a community identity in which personal identity is subsumed. The focus of the self is not upon individuality but upon kinship. Concepts of individuality, of a personal self separated from others, and thus of personal privacy, are weak. And in the context of identities and behaviours they all have a central impact on the social constructions of actual sexual behaviours.

Further there are also specific understandings of malehood and femalehood. These are to some extent defined by socio-cultural duties and obligations to the marriage partner, family and community, A man is not an adult man until he is married, a woman not until she is married and with her first child (often this could mean a boy-child). To be a single person after a certain age is seen as shameful, bringing dishonour to the family, and is often seen as an aberration or sickness. Marriage is the “cure” for aloneness.

Contemporary South Asian languages do not have specific expressions for homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality as nouns or as adjectives in the contexts that they are understood in the West. What exists are terms that express differing forms of sexual behaviours that are gendered, but these terms are often abusive and male dominated referring to specific acts of penetration. Sexual behaviours are within constructions of what is deemed appropriate penetrative or penetrated behaviour for men and women. In these constructions, who does the penetrating in a sexual act becomes important for male self-definition. To be penetrated as stated earlier is to be a "not-man", a "woman".

Sexual behaviour therefore is not an expression of a personal identity. Rather, for many men, it often becomes one of duty, opportunity, accessibility, cost, and a self-

absorbed need for sexual discharge. The phrase "body tension", "body heat" is an expression of this discharge.

Such contemporary frameworks do not preclude differing frameworks of sexualities in the histories of South Asian cultures. The Indian sub-continent has experience layers of differing invasions from pre-Vedic times to the British Raj, including the Mughal period, bringing with them their own constructions and frameworks of identities. All of these have had a major impact upon constructions of gender, sexualities and sexual behaviours. The denial of these histories by various discourses of both Western and South Asian origin have given rise to the contemporary construction of sexuality, which is ahistoric and where "penetrative heterosexuality" is the only sexuality that is seen as relevant. Perversely, any other form is categorised as *deviant and Western*.

At the same time the construction of patriarchal social systems, the enforcement of compulsory marriage and the procreative necessity of boy children have created a pattern of destruction, marginalisation and denial concerning alternate sexualities and their histories in South Asia. A dominant sexuality has historically emerged which has claimed precedence over all others as a system of social control which enables male power to take on a singular and patronising social role.

Alternate histories, which often existed as traditions of the periphery, are being lost at various levels due to the dominance of procreative ideologies at the rural level and the overwhelming construction of any tradition from solely a procreative heterosexual basis. Older alternate mythologies and histories are manipulated, deformed, and mutilated to suit rural male patriarchal ideologies, which leads to women being the repository of tradition but not its interpreters. This creates rural economies where there is a gender segregation of labour, boy children as rural capital, and control of land, economic and cultural resources by men, which are recreated within urban spaces. This also leads to the construction of discharge, desire and sexuality only from the standpoint of the rural patrilineal male, which is then romanticised by various urban discourses as traditional authenticity. In other words denial of alternate sexualities and matrilineal traditions are perpetuated both from within and without.

Rather than a pluralistic vision emerging, only procreative and penetrative sexuality is seen as socially acceptable. Traditions expressive of sexual diversity are seen as dirty, deviant and perverted, and the work of evil, over sexual, devouring women. Sex is either defined as penetrative and gendered or outside of this and to maintain fictions of male power, sex becomes deconstructed into play or discharge.

The resultant psycho-social constructions of sexualities, the denial of different expressions of sexualities, the socio-political control of sexualities, has resulted in a cultural development that demands compulsory marriage and procreation, that gives no validity and social space for autonomous women, that demeans unmarried individuals, particularly single women and that only confers adulthood and thus social status and responsibility to married people.

Sexual behaviour takes the place of sexuality. Women's sexual behaviour becomes controlled and marginalised, if not denied. Male sexual behaviour becomes self-absorbed, and is reduced to one of discharge rather than based upon a desire for the other person. Sex behaviour becomes depersonalised. Sexuality has no construction. The sex act becomes brutalised whether it is between male and female or male and male. For women who desire other women, there is no social space for such a development. Concepts of personal choice, of privacy, become lost. There can be no development of individuality.

As a consequence, in the contemporary South Asian situation with regard to sexualities and their physical expression, indications are of a brutalised sexual behaviour, of an almost indiscriminate sexual activity by men without regard to the gender of the sexual partner which is not defined by any form of identity, but rather by the concept of availability and discharge; by the levels of severe sexual repression which leads towards moments of brutalised and urgent sexual release.

Because of this terrible silencing and denial of these histories from various ideologies, an almost total exile situation has emerged. In trying to resist this exile a closeted and schizophrenic state of being has emerged where the person tries to assimilate into society through marriage and having children, yet expressing alternate sexual desires in *pardah*, in darkness, shame and in silence.

There is also simultaneously another construction around male sexual behaviours, which can be loosely defined by the Hindi term, *maasti*. It means mischief, and is often used in the context of sexual play between young men and boys. More often than not it does not involve penetration, and involves invisibilised sexual play between friends. This *maasti* arises at moments of sexual tensions, as a "body tension", when sexual discharge becomes urgent, when sexual arousal arises during play or body contact, when opportunities are created for sexual contact, in the dark, under the blanket, in shared beds. Such opportunities are very frequent, where shared households have shared beds. There is a social acceptance of males sharing beds, of male-to-male affectionalism, both public and private. This means that significant

levels of male to male sexual behaviour occurs within family environments and networks, between male relatives and friends. But this is not real sex! This is *maasti*, easily invisibilised and denied. In this context, the focus of future obligations means that the object of desire is still a woman, but because she is unobtainable, another male will do.

Within this framework romantic and passionate love can also express itself. Intense friendships between males in a homosocial and homoaffectionalist culture create boundaries that are easily crossed in sexual play. But always, for the vast majority the socio-cultural goal will still be marriage and children.

There is a small, but growing movement, amongst those whose sense of personal identity and emotional and sexual desires are outside the socially constructed “norm”, to create new forms of identities that enable them to express their desires in healthy and caring ways. Many of these may well call themselves lesbians, gay men, homosexuals, bisexuals and even heterosexuals.

In the main, these evolving, or emerging, identities are arising arise through the growth of urban and industrialised cultures, the rising sense of individuality, privacy and private space with the development of nuclear family lifestyles, the expansion of education, and the power of the English-speaking middle-classes with access to Western literature and therefore of other choices. Lesbian and gay groups have emerged, particularly in India, but Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan also have gay groups, often closeted, but defined with the language of sexuality. These groups meet, socialise, discuss and debate (usually in English) the issues of sexual identities and "coming out". Gay activism in these countries is growing, challenging national constitutions and legal frameworks to decriminalise homosexuality that was left over from the British Raj. But the real question will be whether these emerging identities will imitate Western constructions and attempt to live these out within South Asian cultures, or whether differing identities will be constructed. We await a paper from the future.

Perhaps in the light of this, it may be necessary to see the concept of heterosexuality as part of spectrum of alternate sexualities and their expression, where the dualistic and oppositional construct of heterosexuality versus homosexuality can be challenged. In such a way we can begin to decentralise the concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality as oppositional and their complimentary roles within frameworks of compulsory marriage and procreation.

If we are to move towards societies that enable all people to express their best, that gives people the opportunity to develop personhood, that enables people to make choices about their sexuality and sexual/emotional desires, that empowers people to make positive decisions about their own sexual health and others, then this whole voyage of discovery becomes a social imperative.

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