

Under The Blanket

Bisexualities and AIDS in India

June 1996

INTRODUCTION

The debate concerning gender constructions, sexuality, sexual behaviours and sexual health, and the development of effective and appropriate prevention programmes in regard HIV/AIDS, has become an issue of deep urgency for India. For if we do not construct the debate effectively, if we cannot clearly define the parameters of what we mean by the term sexuality, if we do not understand the cultural frameworks within which sexual behaviours operate, then we will not be able to develop effective prevention methods to decrease the rates of infection.

India already has an HIV/AIDS epidemic. The ability of the Indian government to cope with the health care needs of people living with AIDS is already compromised by the strains placed upon health delivery systems that currently exist. Primary, secondary and tertiary care are stretched beyond their capacity to deliver effective sexual health promotion and care because of funding shortages, other priorities, denial, invisibility of issues, economic pressures, fear, sexism, sexphobia, "homophobia", and ignorance.

It is currently estimated (1994) by the World Health Organisation that some 1.5 - 2 .5 million people are living with HIV in India. Further that within the next decade, this figure is likely to reach up to 20 million such infections. The Harvard AIDS Institute's estimates are even higher, some 50 million infections. South Asia has the fastest rate of increase of HIV infection in the world, and by 2020 will have more people living with HIV/AIDS than the combined numbers of the rest of the world (if not before).

With the current configuration of the development of HIV related illnesses in infected people within India having a shorter time frame than that in the West, we can generally say that by the end of the century, some one million people will be dying from AIDS.

The main route of transmission appears to be penetrative sexual behaviour. Whilst WHO estimates are defined within heterosexual/homosexual dichotomies, stating that 70% of all transmission is through heterosexual intercourse, this is being challenged, not in terms of the actual figures, but in terms of the terminologies used. Within the

context of Indian cultures, heterosexual and homosexual frameworks do not exist in the sense that they are understood in the West. The diametrical, oppositional and identity-based frameworks of heterosexual/homosexual terminological labelling does not explain what is sexually happening in India. We cannot really say there is heterosexual/homosexual transmission. All we can say is that there is sexual transmission, anal and/or vaginal. In the context of India, sufficient anecdotal as well as quantitative data exists to indicate that anal intercourse is highly relevant in transmission data. It is the denial of the existence of these sexual behaviour patterns and their relative public invisibility that allows Government as well as WHO to state the idea that this transmission is "heterosexual".

To develop appropriate prevention strategies, we therefore need to understand the dynamics of "sexuality", the constructions of gender, the psycho-social-cultural frameworks of sexual behaviours and the contexts in which they exist in India. Unfortunately, in the development of HIV prevention and outreach programmes, "sexuality", identities, and sexual behaviours have been conceptualised within Eurocentric understandings and constructions.

The fluidity of the Indian male's sexual experience and behaviour (and here I am generalising but with significant anecdotal evidence), the frameworks of sexual invisibility, gender segregation, Indian homosociability, male ownership of public space, shame cultures, community "izzat", compulsory and arranged marriages, joint and extended families, lack of personal identities, or at the least, subsumed within a family/community identity which has precedence, male and female roles as definers of adulthood, have a central impact upon the constructions of sexual behaviours, and the specific genders upon (sic) which sexual behaviours are expressed. And it is in this that the weakness of Eurocentric constructions of identities and sexuality is problematic. If not downright dangerous when developing HIV prevention strategies.

This reports focuses on the male sexual behaviour in India and in the context of this essay, male "bisexualities". This does not imply that Indian women are not sexually active either before marriage or after, or in other arenas, but in terms of HIV prevention and the actual construction of male sexual behaviours, it is our belief (The Naz Project) that the impact on women's sexual and reproductive health has to be seen in this context.

I might also like to add that this is also relevant to the other countries of South Asia and the surrounding countries.

So before we can progress to look at "Bisexualities and AIDS" we first need to look more closely at the constructions of "bisexualities" in India, seek its relevance to the increase in HIV/AIDS in India, and then explore what steps can be taken in this context to prevent its spread.

Space and time do not give us adequate address to the issues. What follows is somewhat simplistic, generalised and iconoclastic, and it is understood that there will always be exceptions. But like the adage, exceptions prove the general rule. The analysis has arisen from 7 years work in the issues of sexuality, sexual behaviours and HIV/AIDS within a South Asian context.

It should also be pointed out that very little research has been in India into the actuality of sexual behaviours, particularly amongst men who have sex with men. Most studies have been within the Eurocentric constructions, with questions and methodologies providing ready-made responses. People have not been allowed to speak for themselves, except in very limited ways.

With these provisos let us proceed.

LANGUAGE

Òthe human mind cannot think a thought unless the words to express the thought existsÓ

George Orwell - '1984'

Language is centrally a cultural artefact. While languages are learned, they are not learned in isolation. The process of learning takes place within the context of interacting perceptions, beliefs and personal experiences of the past and present as well as expectations of the future. And the words themselves carry a socially constructed history of their own. All these mediate and condition the learning of language, and the meanings we imbue to words.

In communicating thoughts and ideas, of sharing information, this has enormous implications. More specifically, in terms of sexual health, of HIV/AIDS, of sexual behaviours, how do we ensure a shared understanding of the issues and what we are speaking about. Most cultures have tabooised sexual behaviours, of sex itself, particularly those which are not seen as socially and/or religiously acceptable, or defined as ÒabnormalÓ, ÒsinfulÓ, ÒevilÓ, words that can carry strong emotions of guilt, shame, dishonour and fear. For many cultures sex is within the invisible realm,

and very often there are no commonly available appropriate terms to even discuss sex and sexual behaviours in the public arena.

Different cultures place differing values on the various sexual aspects of our lives. These values are often hidden within the words used by these cultures to describe and/or name these sexual aspects.

Direct correlations between words used in one language and those used in another do not always exist. Translations between one language to another can carry enormous risks of misinformation, misunderstandings, and downright censorship.

With the medicalisation of sexuality and sexual behaviour in Western cultures since the 19th century, a whole new language has evolved to describe sexual behaviours. A naming process developed that categorised and labelled peoples by their sexual practices, creating the terms homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual and all the categorisation of personality and traits for such labelled persons. A person expressing same-sex behaviours became *a* homosexual, a new construction. Procreative heterosexuality became the normative process. The dichotomised and oppositional structures of male and female, also framed the "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality", and the new language of sex was also dichotomised and made oppositional within hierarchical frameworks. One was either masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual (despite the special category of *ÒbisexualÓ*). The discourse of sexuality carried its own seeds of self-definition and was to some extent tautological. Within all this, the heterosexual was sexually defined as *only* having vaginal sex, whilst the homosexual was defined as *only* having anal sex. For the man to have anal sex with a woman was often not considered. An invisible behaviour.

The word homosexual, as it is understood in the West, does not have a direct equivalent in Indian community languages. This does not imply that *ÒhomosexualÓ* behaviours do not exist. What it does mean is that these behaviours have different histories, different contexts, different constructions and are thus named differently.

For example, the act of penetration is a definer of phallic power, a male signifier. For a person to be penetrated is to define that person as *Ònot manÓ*. The language then of male penetration is around gender and power. So *ÒganduÓ*, *ÒkhusraÓ* are words sometimes used synonymously with the term homosexual, but they are not the same. They represents men who are penetrated and have meanings around a lack of masculinity and malehood, a person who is "not a man" and "not a woman", but a third gender. In the same way that the term hijra means a person of a third gender.

Generally though, the word applies specifically to "men" who become hijras. These terms are abusive, derogatory and degrading. But be careful here. In India, malehood and femalehood is also defined as family, community and social duties. A man can be extremely "effeminate" in behaviour (as the term is defined in the West), but because he fulfils his community duties as a married man with sons, he is defined as manly, a proper man. Further a boy (male who is not yet a man in terms of social duties and responsibilities) maybe extremely masculine (in a Western sense), but is still defined as not-yet-man. He is not married with sons. In that sense there is a framework for a specific gender construction around post-pubescent boys who are not "men". The "beardless youths" of Arab and Mughul India sexual histories. This construction also has strong sexual availability overtones.

CULTURE

Culture is taken to mean the wholeness of a particular community, the social values, contexts of family, religion, marriage, personal relationships, lifestyles, language, traditions and customs. How we conduct ourselves and how our lives are constructed, how they are given meaning and content, what value systems we abide by, the world view that we have, these are the elements that go into the meaning of a culture.

The following attempts to articulate some of the areas within a cultural dynamic that have a bearing on the issues. It focuses broadly (very broadly) on three main areas: Family, Marriage, and Religion. This does not represent the whole issue of what culture is and means. Nor does it pretend to. That would require several volumes.

Family

Within Indian communities, there are extremely strong links with the family and within the family. Here the family is much more than the immediate biological parents and siblings. It includes all the relatives; grand-parents and their relatives, all the uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters-in law, nephews and nieces, cousins five times removed. The Indian family is a joint and extended family, a community in its own right, defined by language, dialect, religious practice, caste, place of origin, and so on. Often whole villages are made of one inter-connected families.

These links are held together by custom, tradition, belief, practice and economics. Their value lies in providing a form of social security and welfare in a culture that has neither. The elders are supported, as are the unemployed, the unmarried, the range of children, the disabled. It is considered a moral duty for the family to stay together in this mutual support system, whether the staying together is physical or psychological.

Of course such extended family systems can be a liberating experience in terms of the social conditions of individual members. To rely on the family for such support, emotional, physical, or financial, relieves much of the burden for sustaining the self. But as a consequence, the concept of individuality becomes lost. There is no space for it. Personal choice and desire becomes subsumed within family choice and desire. The person is replaced by the family. In this context there is no space for a personal identity as the central means of self-definition. Who you are individually is of less importance than which family you are a part of.

This has means that people tend to stay much longer within the family household than their European counterparts. There are a significant number of men and women over 30 who are still living with their parents, who are still single, and who are still considered and treated as children, as not adults. Such single people are often not single by choice though. The economics of marriage have begun to affect marriage dates. The need to find a home, dowries, the costs of living, has delayed marriage to later and later ages. Many men are now marrying in their late twenties or thirties.

At the same time, the social demand for sons as primary income generators, has meant that the life expectancy of female children is much lower than male children. In India there are 928 women for every 1000 men. Some 54% of the population is male. This means that there is a significant and growing shortage of women for men to marry. Or to put it another way, a surplus of men, sexually active men. And with all the family, caste, religious and economic conditions that must be taken into before a marriage takes place, this too has an affect upon the age of marriage.

For the vast majority people, living with their parents there is no personal space. One or two room households, holding parents and several siblings is common. And withing these household, there will be a male space and a female space, boundaries for sleeping.

What privacy here? What confidentiality here? These crammed conditions of sharing "male space" in a culture with high levels of homosociability often create conditions of ÒmastiÓ as a release of Òbody tensionsÓ, these quick and furtive sexual gropings are maintained as invisible behaviours, behaviours of the dark, behaviours "under the blanket" and therefore not real.

You NEVER leave the family home. You carry the psychological space within you all the time. While the crowded flat will generate intense arguments, disagreements, family fights, all members of the extended family, and sometimes even the neighbours, will join in, usually on the side of the parents. This is supported by the

attitude and belief that the duty of the child is to obey the parent, whatever the age of the child. Obedience to parental demands and pressures is one of the central glues that is perceived as holding the family together. To disobey one's parents is to bring shame and dishonour upon the family.

Parents are responsible for their children. In Indian cultures, adulthood and adult responsibilities are conferred after marriage, and for women after her first born son. These become the "rites of passage". Personal privacy as a concept and a right is not imbedded within our cultures.

What is private is the family, and depending on the particular issue or context, this could mean the immediate biological family, the extended family in varying proportions, or the community as a whole. This form of privacy is not shaped by a recognition of need for such privacy. Rather it is motivated by a different conception. "You will bring shame". Its expression is much more powerful than in a Western sense.

This form of social control is constructed by traditional concepts of HONOUR and SHAME. Honour, not so much as what is deemed honourable, but in terms of community perception. Shame, not so much as what may be deemed as wrongful (or even sinful), but by behaviour and conduct which brings shame to the family and/or community as a whole. These two intersecting frameworks arise out of understandings of value systems around what is PUBLIC and what is PRIVATE.

Honour is a possession, not a quality. Shame is an expression of honour being lost. Both of these elements are an expression of publicness. They are public events.

Public behaviour, behaviour which is visible, is bound within a sense of community duty, honour and obligation. In this context any behaviour which is visible to the community falls within the scope of public behaviour and therefore falls within concepts of honour and shame. If the behaviour is not visible, then it doesn't exist! Community honour is maintained. Shame does not exist. And all is well with the world!

Such systems of public and private can lead to denial of what is deemed socially unacceptable behaviours, because of its invisibility in the public domain. "It doesn't exist within our communities", "it is not part of our culture". Contrary evidence will be seen as attacks by the Western cultures and its "stool pigeons".

When an individual behaves in ways deemed to bring dishonour or shame to the family, extended family and/or community, the reaction can often be severe. Exile, excommunication, physical abuse, and sometimes death. Or there will be emotional or financial blackmail by family members to force conformity to family dictates.

Something that occurs in a public space may not be considered public if it is not observed, or if observed, not discussed. For example, in a public toilet site in Calcutta where male to male sexual activity takes place every evening, there are no lights. With no public lighting it becomes a private space. The inside of the toilet is visible from the street because of some street light being shed upon it, and at times, individuals will stop at that point and look into the toilet, often seeing two men involved in a sexual act in the semi-dark. It is still a private event because there is no discussion by the observer. It only becomes a public event, which then can bring shame when there is open discussion; the police arrive; the observer makes loud comments.

The son is the primary child in the family, particularly the first born. Upon his shoulders will rest the responsibility of the future economic welfare of the family. Very often lavish attention is paid to the sons at the expense of the daughters. The daughter plays a secondary role. After all when she gets married, she will leave the family home and become a part of another family. She will no longer be her biological parents daughter, but her husband's parent's daughter. She also represents capital loss through the dowry system.

To maintain her worthiness, and to protect family honour, she must be protected from the wickedness of the world, in particular non-family men. Her virginity as a prized possession is to be nurtured and protected, for it is upon her status as a virgin on her wedding night that will announce publicly the family honour. In this context, women are more socially "policed" in terms of their behaviour, especially sexual, particularly in the "public domain". Women's honour and their honourable behaviour has to be scrutinised. This often means that sexually active men have very little sexual access to women, other than female commercial sex workers.

Marriage

Marriage is THE central issue within our lives, where it is the mainstay of family and/or community life. It can be seen as a compulsory duty towards maintaining family and community ties. It is part of the definition of manhood and femalehood. Not to be married means you are not an adult. The exception is that of the sadhu, or bramacharaya, the person who sacrifices duty and family in search of god. But then

the sadhu becomes a "sexless" being, an ascetic. He/she has sacrificed their "sexuality", their sense of malehood or femalehood, for a "higher cause". This of course does not mean that all so-called sadhus do not have sex. There are some who have sex with their chelas, or with others, both women and men. In Hindu traditions, spiritual sanctity can carry great sexual potency. Whilst Tantric traditions often have a sexual component.

Traditionally, marriages are arranged between two extended families, and such arrangements are based around economic and inter-family connections. Nowadays amongst middle and upper class families, parents may ask their children with regard to the suitability of their choices, and there are processes whereby the two prospective partners can meet each other regularly before a wedding. Very often such meetings are chaperoned by some parental figure. And even while such choice maybe significant, ultimately there is no choice about marriage itself. But for the majority of women and men, choice is subsumed within family choice.

Where there is resistance from a son or daughter towards marriage, enormous pressure can be brought to bear upon the children to submit to the parent's/family's wishes. As the child gets older, such pressures increase and some families will utilise a range of options to enforce the family dictates. Emotional blackmail, financial inducements, threats, excommunication, and sometimes violence, will be used.

To remain unmarried can be seen as an aberration, a sickness, bringing shame and dishonour upon the family. Something must be wrong with the person and/or with the family. The family could not find a marriage partner, or the child has a problem, or they couldn't afford the dowry, and so on.

ÒI'm the oldest. It is expected that I will get married first. My dowry will help in getting my younger sisters married also. And I am expected to get married before my younger brother.Ó

Of course the pressures upon the young women are even more intense. At least the young man can often make a greater range of excuses. Business, education, travel, etc.

Marriage is not seen as an option for choice. It is seen as an essential requirement of maintaining the family, as a family duty, as a sign of obedience to the parents. Rather than resist and challenge our parent's wishes, we will often get married to the choice of our parents.

ÒI didn't want to get married. But what can I do. My parents pushed and pushed. Every day my mother would nag me, my father would nag me. They would invite other families to the house so I could ÒviewÓ the daughters. I finally just gave in. And when I finally said yes, my parents were so happy. But what about me?Ó

Few married men will inform their wives about their extra-marital behaviour. In the main, many believe that all they need to do to function adequately as husbands is in terms of economic support for their wives and engaging in sexual intercourse in order to have children. There are many men who will only have sexual intercourse with their wives a few times a year specifically to get their wives pregnant. There is no joy in such intercourse. It is seen as a duty only. Duty as an adult male, duty to the wife and family, aduty to have children.

Children and filial duty. Sex as an obligation. As one person in a sexual health workshop in Orissa told me, "I do duty to my wife". The wife, sometimes seen as an Honoured Partner, cannot be touched by sexual desire. The wife as Mother, Sister, as bearer of the husband's children. Such desires are part of another construction. Sex for pro-creation is what occurs in marriage. Sex for pleasure is what occurs outside the marriage. Its is considered natural for men to be "lustful". Sex for pleasure and sex as lust are often seen as synonomous. This leads to significant numbers of married men who have sex outside of their marriage. And as long as this behaviour is invisible, it brings no shame and dishonour to the family. Public live is separated from private life. And if women are not accessible or cannot be afforded, then other men or young boys can. It is not so much sexual desire, but sexual discharge.

Ò Yea, I have sex with my wife, perhaps once a month. I don't enjoy it. I rather not do it. But I have to keep her satisfied. She's complained about it to me, but I just shrug my shoulders, you know, pretend that I don't really like sex. Its all very, what's the word? Perfunctory, you know, get on, get off sort of thing. What can I do? I do go out to find men with whom I can have sex with.

What we have here then is a cultural framework of compulsory penetrative and pro-creative sexual intercourse. Other forms of sexual activity not connected to procreation are for pleasure, and very often the only route to express these sexual behaviours is outside of the marriage, but hidden, invisible, under the blanket.

This has a major significance in terms of safer sex behaviour of course, for to use condoms with one's wife creates two tensions. One, it doesn't enable the couple to

fulfil the central requirement of the marriage - children. And two, using a condom generates suspicion in the wife as to why her husband needs to wear a condom. The risk of transmission of STDs and/or HIV infection from husband to wife is immediately obvious.

Within these constructs, women find themselves very vulnerable. Not only are they seen to carry the family honour and tradition, whenever issues arise that challenge this honour, it is the woman who becomes victimised.

A married woman's options can be severely limited. Not only her own family, but members of her husband's family will place enormous pressure to maintain a marriage. Divorce is still relatively low, not because marriages work better than in the West, but because divorce and separation carry dishonour and shame for both families. The public perception of a marriage that maintains itself must be upheld.

Even where there is some sort of Ògay sensibilityÓ in the Western sense, this too becomes restricted, buried under the weight of tradition and custom.

ÒI can't tell my wife about myself. It would destroy my family and her. I can't have a divorce because of the effect it would have on my family as well as her. What would happen to her? I go out several times a month, pick up some guy and stay the night at some local cheap hotel. Or maybe drop by the cruising place on my way home from work in the evening. The wife always has a go at me when I am late home, or stay out the night. I have to really think on the excuses I make. But what can I do? I got married because my family wanted me to. They chose her for me. I just said yes. Couldn't handle the nagging over the years. Delayed as long as I could really. I don't form relationships; that would be too dangerous. And now with the children and all that, I just can't take the risk.

Religion

The main religions of India are Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism and to some extent Indian Christianity.

I am not attempting to define each of these religions in terms of their specific and particular beliefs, traditions, and practices. What this briefly attempts to do is to locate religions within a cultural context, the interaction of religion and social dynamics. For example, Bengali Muslims, while having the same faith as Pakistani Muslims, will often have very different customs and traditions. This is because of different languages, different histories, different geographies, etc. Further while sometimes

these religions are seen as monolithic, they are not. Islam, has several different branches. Each follows the Koran, and the Hadith, but each has its own traditions and customs, based upon interpretation of the Hadith and the Koran, whether they are Sunni, Sh'ia, Sufi, Ishmaili and so on. Similarly Hinduism is not constructed around a central person, creed or doctrine, but is a mixture of a broad and eclectic systems of beliefs and doctrines. While Sikhism arose from an attempt to unify the beliefs of Islam and Hinduism.

What needs to be clearly understood is that religion and culture are not isolated from each other, nor do they represent the same thing, but are interwoven in complex dynamics. While the religions specify particular social practices, beliefs and attitudes, very often cultural traditions and customs will outweigh religious beliefs and statements. What matters is interpretation, but who does the interpretation? Where interpretation of religious texts interpenetrate cultural beliefs and customs, then very often these customs and practices will take on a sanctity that never existed in the original sacred text.

It should also be remembered that in contrast to the way that Christianity is viewed and practices in the West, where it is seen as very much a matter of personal choice and individual response, the religions of the sub-continent relate to how the communities function as a whole. Religious and secular life centres in the mosque, the temple and the gurdwara. Public faith in a specific system of beliefs, whether Hindu, Islam or Sikh is not separated from the day to day life of the person, but an integral part of community and public life.

This of course does not mean that there isn't intense personal belief and practice. Of course there is. The private namaz, the personal prayer, the puja at home. For many religion provides personal solace, meaning and content to one's live. But with all this goes the daily observances, the food a person eats, his or her relationships with each other and the family, interactions with the community and community structures, various religious celebrations and festivals, are interlinked and interdependent. This is the visible side, the proof of one's religious observance. Private and public are co-joined, which means that there will be those for whom only the public observance matters, whose private practice may not be in line with public observance. This cannot be seen as hypocrisy though, because the public and private spheres have different meanings to those of the West.

Religion becomes an obligation to the community, a duty to the community. Not to accept this duty brings shame and dishonour to the family and to the community.

Thus we can say that community participation, more than a personal belief, has a greater relevance. It relates a lot more to what you are seen to do than what you actually do. Participation involves submission to the daily rituals, customs and traditions that surround a specific religious belief. It is public acceptance rather than a private knowing.

Romance and Friendship

What has love got to do with marriage? This question is often heard amongst sexually active men. The expectation and hope is that love will grow after the marriage. Anecdotal evidence indicates that for many women and men, this only remains a hope.

India is filled with romance, always visible, always present. Watch any of the ubiquitous Bollywood film. The hero and the heroine sing romantic and chaste love songs to each other. They go through the trials and tribulations that the four hours demand, and if their families will agree to the match, then they can get married and sexual fulfillment will follow. The key is if the families agree.

If such romance cuts across race, caste, sub-caste, religion, economic group, then the likelihood will be that such romance cannot be fulfilled. The family always wins.

In terms of Indian cultural norms, direct relationships, with men and women before marriage, social or sexual, is frowned upon and socially unacceptable. Such socialisation is seen as allowing the possibility of dishonouring the woman's family. Men are seen as naturally lustful, uncontrollable, while young women are seen as being able to arouse that lust. Women must be protected from men's lust, whilst men must be protected from "women's wiles".

In that sense, the public domain is owned by males. For a woman to be seen with man who is not a relative or husband can create damaging and dishonouring gossip. Families will police their young women. To be seen out in the evening on your own as a woman, can give the label "evening person", a prostitute. To kiss a woman who is not married to you, or hold her hand in public is to risk dishonouring her, and in some cases the man will also risk abuse and violence. Physical affection for a woman must be behind closed doors. But if there isn't that privacy available....? For many young men, women are just not accessible. Romantic longings are at a distance, unfulfilled, chaste. Visits to female commercial sex workers are not romantic. Love does not enter the equation. It is just sexual release. Quick with a cash transaction. And for many men beyond their financial reach. The visit to the prostitute is infrequent, after saving

the necessary amount. For the many urban men these are the only women sexually available.

For many men, across all ages, all this emotional and sexual energy, this romantic longing, the affectional needs tend to be channelled between themselves. Intense friendships are formed within homoaffectionalist frameworks which includes extensive male to male touching, holding of hands, body contact, and sleeping together in crowded spaces.

This does not imply that all men in India are having sex with each other! India as a homosocial culture, where women are difficult to access either for friendship or for sex, has created social spaces where it is acceptable, if not encouraged, for men to show affection to each other, both publicly and private.

The line between homoaffectionalism in such a supportive environment and actual homosexual behaviour is a fine line, and many men cross this line in situations that enable the behaviour to maintain its invisibility.

Thus often two boys/men sharing a bed under the same blanket may find it easier to sexually touch each other without consciously acknowledging the fact.

In one situation that I was witness to was in a working class single room home. Parents, four children, one a male in the mid teens, and also an uncle of the children. The male teenager and uncle were sharing a blanket, while the female members of the household were getting on with the house-keeping. It was obvious what the two male were doing under the blanket, a behaviour totally ignored by the women. Discussions with the uncle at a later time indicated that during the night, the two young men would often masturbate together under their shared blanket, and on some occasions, the older would penetrate the younger. "When everyone is asleep". Because the behaviour was invisible, there didn't appear to be any sense of shame or guilt. "What can I do? I get body tension. He gets body tension. We are together? It just happens. We are friends."

Will he get married? Of course! Will he have sex with a woman if he had the opportunity? Of course! Has he had sex with other men. Of course, in similar circumstances!

This is linked to a construction around sexual behaviour in Indian cultures, which is to do with pleasure, fun, sexual play between friends, which can be defined by the

Hindi word *maasti*. The word is not easily translated, but in a sexual context it means sexual playfulness, and is usually used in the context of sexual play between young men and boys. It is not seen as a serious act, because it does not involve a woman, nor very often is it seen as sex. To some extent it is even socially permissible, "young men letting off steam", as long as it remains invisible. This does not differentiate this form of sexual playfulness from others, for all sexual behaviour, whether socially legitimate (sex between married partners) or otherwise must also remain invisible.

Despite these intense friendships which produce visible physical affection between males of all ages, which sometimes may well lead to sexual acts between friends (and if there is an age difference between the two males, the older one may penetrate the younger), and where such feelings may be defined in Western terms by the word "gay", this identity is just not there in the person. Sex with another male is not so much a permanent feature but an additional outlet. The constant expectation is that one day the person will be married and have children, and perhaps they may be able to afford sex with a female prostitute. Here sex is discharge, opportunity.

Sexual Availability and Behaviours

Sexual behaviour therefore is not an expression of a personal identity. Rather it often becomes one of opportunity, accessibility and personal desire for sexual discharge. The phrase "releasing body tension" is an expression of this discharge.

This does not imply that loving bonds between men does not exist. Yes it does. Intense emotional and sexual relationships do exist, but these are framed by the cultural necessity of marriage and children. Very few men or women are able to escape this cultural necessity. There are also frameworks for desire for a specific gender, i.e. men specifically desire other men and seek other men for sex (and sometimes love). Such seeking can often only occur in public spaces. There are no "gay" bars, clubs, discos. Indian public spaces are primarily male. The street, the bus stand, the park, the public toilet, the railway or bus station, these are the arenas of contact. Such publicness leads to quick sex, penetrative or otherwise, in the darkness of parks and toilets, behind bushes, in alleyways, on beaches.

Workers in the public arena join in the networks. Whether just for sexual release, money, or actual desire for sex with other men is a difficult question to answer. Taxi-drivers, rickshaw wallahs, malaish wallahs, room service boys and housekeeping men in hotels, waiters at restaurants, shop assistants. The framework is ubiquitous. The glance, the second glance, the smile, the appropriate questions, sometimes "for a few

rupees more", sometimes just maasti.... In Indian urban cultures, male to male sex does not exist in a few selected areas as in Western cities. It is anywhere, in the right conditions, the right time, the right space.

Perhaps we could say that Indian "sexualities", are time and spacially based!

In the middle classes, domestic servants also can make sexually availability easier. The employer has a power based relationship with the domestic servants. There are significant numbers of such owners sexually accessing male or female domestic servants. Further anecdotal evidence exists to indicate that male domestic servants sexually access the male children as well. Sex between the young male sons and the young (and sometimes not so young male servants is not as rare as people think it is).

Such behaviours are not only an urban phenomena. Discussions over the years with several hundred village men between the ages of 15 to 30 indicate that sex between men also occur in village environment. In the fields, in the dark. In the home under shared blankets.

A lot of this sex is between relatives; uncles and nephew, cousins, in-laws, where space and time afford it.

Let us just play with some figures.

In India, 54% of the population are male. The Indian population is approximately 900 million. This means that there are 490 million males. The majority of males lie are under the age of 45, while research indicates that the Indian male begin sexual activity between the ages of 14 to 20. So let us say that 60% of males are sexually active. This gives us a total of 291,600,000 sexually active males. And out of this number the majority would below the age of 35, the most sexually active age.

All evidence indicates that male to male sex is very high in India for all the above reasons. But let us use a conservative estimate and state that 50% of this figure has sex with other males. I am not stating that they ONLY have sex with other males. I am just stating that sex with other males would be a part of their sexual repertoire. This gives us 145,800,000 males at some time or other have sex with other males, frequently or infrequently. The suspicion is that actually the figure may well be higher.

In a variety of research conducted by The Naz Project (almost nothing effective in research is being done regarding male to male sexual behaviours), the first sexual partner was (in descending order):

- a. cousin (male or female)
- b. an uncle or aunt
- c. a neighbour (male or female)
- d. friend
- e. male domestic servant
- f. another relative
- g. parent's friend
- h. stranger

What all this says is that in India, sexual behaviour between males is very common, but hidden, invisible, not only because it is not within the public gaze, but also because no-one talks about it. But within this context, the behaviour is bound within the necessity for marriage, desire for opportunistic sex with women, access to sexual space and so on. Further what definitions exist regarding male to male sex, such as the "hijra" or the 'homosexual' act as frames for hiding such levels of activity. "Of course he isn't a 'hijra'".

What terminology can be used then? I don't know. The title of this book incorporates the word bisexualities, meaning, different frameworks of bisexual behaviours, if I have read it right. But I still believe that this carries enormous risks in such definitions and how AIDS prevention programmes become constructed. Yes, there are a growing number, small at the moment, urban, educated, English speaking, who are beginning to identify with the label "gay". They have "homosex" or "gaysex". Yes, because of marriage, one could say that most Indian male to male sex is behaviourally bisexual. However, I still feel uncomfortable.

Indian male sexuality is amorphous, opportunistic, spatially, discharge based, time-based. Perhaps we need to move away from the reductionist, scientific, and naming process, and accept a more holistic approach to the issues.

AIDS

In the introductory remarks, it was recognised that the HIV/AIDS situation in India is of crisis proportions. And that part of the crisis has been the refusal to face the reality of Indian sexual behaviours, of which a significant component is male to male sex within cultural dynamics that have a major impact upon both males and females.

But there are a host of other issues, that are having a serious impact on the ability to develop effective prevention programmes as well as care and support programmes.

Here are some of them:

1. Extremely poor sex education. Very little public discussion on sex, except perhaps for the urban elite. Recently I came across an English magazine "Fantasy" which has an article - a how-to article - on anal sex between men and women. A detailed procedure was written, but not a word about anal sex between men, nor a word about condoms.

2. Very poor knowledge of condom usage. Even where men can access condoms, what we are finding that the majority of men who use condoms do not know how to put condoms properly. There is very little education on how to use condoms. This results in high levels of breakage, slippage, and irritation.

3. The time and space to use condoms is extremely limited. As stated above, the majority of homes have no privacy. Sex is under the blanket and in the dark. Sex is in a space where others will be around. No undressing for sex. Most male to male sex takes place in public spaces. Time is of the essence. For many penetration to ejaculation is often within five minutes. One of the constant questions that men have asked is about "pre-mature" ejaculation. I have jokely stated that there is no such thing as premature ejaculation in India, rather the ejaculation takes place within the time constraints!

(Similarly I have also joked that there are not heterosexuals in India. Rather there are people who are married or want to get married!)

4. India has extremely high rates of STD infection. In 1992, WHO has stated that India had 94 million REPORTED cases of STD infection. It is estimated that the real figure was probably twice that. And the numbers are increasing as is the infection rate.

5. Most bathing (unless in middle class flats which have their own private bath) is in a public space. Both men and women therefore do not undress completely to bath. Women will wear a sari, men their shorts. The bath situation means lower genital hygiene.

6. In urban areas, high levels of pollution, polluted water, environmental degradation, adulterated food, low hygiene, corruption of officials, over-congested

public hospitals, expensive private hospitals, extremely low level of knowledge by the medical profession, ignorance around HIV transmission, AIDS phobia generally (well the list can go on) means that the time frame between infection and illness and death is much shorter than in the West.

7. No coordinated strategy around HIV prevention, and almost no work regarding men who have sex with men, "gay-identified", "bisexual" or otherwise. I am only aware of three small projects in the whole of India working in this arena which receive any sort of funding or support.

8. No support at institutional level.

9. No support from funding agencies, Indian-based or international

Well need I go on.

India still primarily focuses on targeted groups and within these targeted groups only on vaginal sex. Truck drivers, female commercial sex workers (forgetting about male sex workers of which India has a substantial numbers in urban areas), intravenous drug users (but all their education material is about IV use and nothing on their sexual behaviours). It forgets that men also have sex with men as well as with women, that for significant numbers of unmarried men, sex between men is their only sexual outlet, either desire based or opportunity-based. That men also have anal sex with women. It has adopted Eurocentric constructions of identities and sees things in a heterosexual/homosexual framework, and thus misses the majority of male to male sexual behaviours.

To summarise, for a significant proportion of sexually active men in India, whatever their age, their sexual behaviour can loosely be described (very loosely indeed) as "bisexually oriented". That is while the desire (socially constructed towards marriage and children - as one interviewee stated, "this is practice for when I get married") may be oriented towards women (in particular the wife), and may well include sex with a woman as and when an opportunity or finance arises, primarily a female sex worker, but not always, the actual sexual activity is generally with another male, for the reasons outlined above. This behaviour, in the main, does not have an identity structure, although there is a relatively small number of urban, educated, English speaking and reading, middle/upper income, who are developing a "gay-construct", often within the context of marriage too. Part of this development relates to the access to information from the West, and the impact the West is having economically,

politically and culturally. Hollywood, CNN, BBC World Service, books, ideas, and the West's lesbian and gay politics.

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 Indian with regard to alternate sexualities and their expression indicate a brutalised sexual behaviour, shown by the significant levels of vaginal and anal tearing; 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 repressions which leads towards moments of brutalised sexual release.

There is a small, but growing movement amongst those whose sense of personal identities and emotional and sexual desires are outside the socially constructed norms, 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, bisexuals and even heterosexuals.

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.

The impact of all this is extremely marginal on the vast majority of men who have sex with men. Often non-educated, working class, both urban and rural, their desires are shaped by other factors. In Hinduism and Islam, celibacy and abstinence are not central to the belief structures. And although the idea is for sex inside marriage only, social structures and cultural frameworks actually encourages male to male sex more than male to female sex.

In the light of this, it will be necessary to see the concept of heterosexuality as part of spectrum of alternate sexualities and their expression. In such a way can we begin to decentralise the concepts of heterosexuality and its concomitant role within the frameworks of compulsory marriage and heterosexuality.

In terms of AIDS, the development of the range of preventative strategies that are necessary if there is not to be the huge potential personal, social, cultural and economic impact, is an urgent necessity. Already the estimate is of at least one million dying from AIDS within five years. Are we to enter into the next millennium with an uncontrolled spiral of illness and death which Indian can ill afford, which individuals, families and communities do not have the capacity to cope?