

Males who have sex with males in India and Bangladesh

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Introduction

It is often asked “how many MSM are there in Bangladesh? or India?”, usually by Western donors, consultants, and representatives of many AIDS NGOs.

The question seems to be reasonable and make sense, but it actually represents a misconception of the context of male sexual behaviours in the region.

In this context we should really be talking about male to male sexual behaviours rather than men who have sex with men (MSM). Further, the way the question is phrased generates a conception of MSM as an exclusive group, an identity rather than a behaviour. But, even more contentiously, the question itself cannot be answered with any adequate response or accuracy.

In summary what we can say about male to male behaviours in Bangladesh and India is that

- * For the majority of males involved in male to male sex, MSM is not an identity but most often a behaviour arising from from a feminine gender identification, or a perceived "many" discharge need. Such behaviours are not contextualised within a heterosexual - homosexual paradigm
- * It appears to be that a significant level of MSM behaviours in the region is contextualised within a gendered framework - where a feminised gender performance frames the *kothi*.
- * This gendered framework is constructed within a *kothi/panthi* dynamic, where the *kothi* perceives himself and his desire for other males in the context of gender roles in Bangladesh, i.e. the “penetrated” partner. *Kothis* construct their social roles, mannerisms and behaviours in ways which attract what they call *panthis* - “real men”, identifying as feminised males. In this context these *kothis* are usually the visible MSM in a range of public environments and neighbourhoods, but *panthis* are not, for they could potentially be any “manly” male
- * These “real” men do not see themselves as homosexuals or less masculine because of their sexual involvement with *kothis*. They penetrate *kothis* who are not “real men” - they are *kothis*.
- * In other words we have a spectrum of masculinities
- * In a culture that excludes females from public spaces, that socially polices females and controls their access by males, and where sexual behaviours are

based on gender identification rather than sexual identity, it is possible that for many “manly” males, sexual access will be with *kothis*, or those deemed less “manly”, i.e. young males and adolescents.

- * With this gendered dynamic it may be possible to physical count the number of *kothis* at a range of public sites, but this doesn't address the so-called “goopon” or “gupti *kothis*” - the ones who are secret. Nor does this address the number of “manly” partners these *kothis* access in arenas other than the public spaces of parks, railway stations, and so on.
- * Beside the *kothi* frameworks, there is another dynamic of male to male sexual behaviours, which because of a shame-based culture cannot be readily accessed. This includes inter-family male to male sex, sex between friends, male only spaces. Such behaviours are not identity-based where desire is based on same- biological sex, but rather on immediacy, “body heat” and felt “discharge” needs
- * Such behaviours could be significantly high since there is a limited social construction of heterosexuality - perhaps we can call this “behaviourally heterosexual” - and where sexual access to females is very limited. What appears to exist in Bangladesh and India is a core identity in terms of gender role, marital status and class.
- * Gay relationships are based on a personal sexual identity, a mutuality, friendship and exchangeable sexual acts - they are companionate relationships formed within a same sex/same gender dynamic
- * *Kothi* relationships, however, are based on gender roles - a “husband and wife” relationship. *Kothis* are not friends with their *panthis*, but “wife”. This is a relationship based on same sex/different gender identification dynamic. *Kothis* make friends with other *kothis* with whom they “never” have sex with. For *kothis* this would be like having sex with their sister.
- * This does not mean that *kothis* do not penetrate or that *panthis* are not penetrated. They do, but these behaviours are seen as crossing the gender barrier and are considered even more shameful. They are kept even more secret. And while *kothis* have a term for such behaviours - *do-parathas*, *double-deckers*, *dubli*, and so on, generally such individuals are looked upon with scorn. A *panthi* who is penetrated is called a *gupti kothi*, while a *kothi* who is know to penetrate another male is seen as not a real *kothi*.
- * male sexual desire for another male should therefore be contextualised differently from male to male sexual behaviour.
- * *Hijras* are a different framework altogether. They represent a sociocultural - religious identity, based on gender identification but not within the male-

female binary opposition. While many people believe *hijras* are biologically hermaphrodites, this is not true. The vast majority of *hijras* are biologically male, where many will be fully castrated in a religious ceremony. Their social structures are based on the Hindu *Guru* system and female identified family structure. *Hijras* should not be perceived within hegemonic either/or gender opposition, but as a different gender altogether - perhaps as a “third gender”. Nor should *hijras* been called “eunuch:, or transvestites, transsexuals, or even transgenders. They are *Hijras*. (See *Nanda, Serena : Neither man nor Woman - Hijras of India*, Wadsworth, USA, 1990 and *Jaffrey, Zia: The invisibles - a tale of the eunuchs of India*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997.)

The MSM Context in Bangladesh and India

Men who have sex with men (MSM) should not be seen as an exclusive category of people, defined by a specific occupation or activity, unlike perhaps female sex workers and IDUs, or even truck drivers and slum dwellers, categories used in Bangladesh and India by donor agencies, NGOs and National AIDS Programmes. In Bangladesh and India, MSM can exist in a broad (often bewildering) variety of identities, behaviours, and practices. What seems to exist are a range of masculinities with differing contextualisation of a range of sexual behaviours, partner choices and desires.

Contemporary research on sexuality and gender have clearly shown that bipolar categories, such as man or woman as gender categories, and heterosexual or homosexual as sexual categories, are “not useful to describe the range of identities, desires and practices” (personal discussion with Carol Jenkins, Care Bangladesh, 1999) existing in South Asia. The terms “gay” or “homosexual” are also too constricted by a specific history, geography, language and culture to have any significant usefulness in a different culture from their source. In this we should be talking about sexualities, genders, and at the least, homosexualities and heterosexualities. Where UNAIDS and others speak of behaviourally homosexual, we can also talk about behaviourally heterosexual in the South Asian content.

Beyond all this are the gender categories of man or woman. Self-identities amongst MSM in India and Bangladesh vary across the spectrum of divergent categories, where those most public in the expression of same-sex desire, usually identify themselves as a different gender category which is feminised, expressing themselves in feminine language, sometimes through dress, make-up and mannerisms, and who also have access to their own specific “secret” language (*ulti* - a derivative of the *hijra*

language) which is unavailable to the majority population. These individuals call themselves *kothis*, but this is a socialising and socialised role, where a “new” *kothi* with emergent sexual desires for other males (and often not so emergent, but in full force) will make friends with “older” *kothis* and learn the characteristics, roles, behaviours (including sexual), mannerisms and language. And it is this *kothi* framework which appears to dominate the MSM contexts in South Asia, in terms of the poor and low and middle income sectors which represent over 70% of the population.

Kothis see themselves as the feminine in a masculine/feminine sexual partnership, and play out the perceived gender role in the culture. Most *kothis* feel relatively comfortable with their choice, although expressing a varying degree of shame in terms of the shame-based culture of Bangladesh and India. Those men who access these *kothis* for sex, and sometimes for sexual relationships and partnerships, are seen as “real men” by the *kothis*, men who play the “dominant”, “active” and “penetrating” role. Such men do not see themselves as “homosexuals”, since the people they have sex with are not “men”, but feminised males, *kothis*. They do not have a sexual identity term for themselves, but practice a sexual behaviour, very often based on “discharge” and “body heat”. They see themselves as manly men. The label *panthi* is used by *kothis* to describe them, meaning a “real man”, a man who will penetrate them, and who most likely will also have sex with women. Many *kothis* speak of **all** men as potential *panthis*, accessible to them as sexual partners, accessible, not based on male to male desire, but because of what was perceived as an urgent need for sexual discharge.

As part of their public gender performance, many low income group *kothis* take oral contraceptives (many can’t afford, or can’t access, hormone injections) as a means of developing breasts, stating that *panthis* like to “squeeze” their breasts as a part of their sexual practice. From the range of discussions, taking oral contraceptives by these males is a significant activity, not as a means to become more like women, but as a tool to attract *panthis* as sexual partners.

Sociocultural, religious and family pressure ensure that the majority of *kothis* will eventually marry and produce children, no matter how long they attempt to delay this process. The choice is often stark. Stay with your family, or leave! And with no social welfare system available, there is a perception of no choice. This intense pressure produces a range of psychological effects, a depression and fear of non-performance with their wives, to a constant search for a “real man” who will “marry” them and

look after them. In the discussions several *kothis* stated that they will even sometimes use female sex workers “for practice”.

Some of the *kothis* from low income groups become sex workers as a source of generating and income. Usually this income was to support their family. But it should be noted that not all male sex workers are *kothis*, and not all *kothis* are sex workers. Although in this study *kothi* sex workers by far were the majority in the sex worker category.

Panthis are less clearly defined, being men of all ages and types, married and unmarried, across the spectrum of income and employment, who, at least at times, enjoy sex with other men or stated they could not access females, and they could not control their “body heat” and “needed to discharge”. There was a strong sense of immediacy, urgency, opportunity and availability to their sexual behaviours with the *kothis*.

And of course all *panthis* will either be married or will get married eventually, fulfilling the social, religious and family expectations for all men in Indian culture. But beyond this “public” framework of identities, desires, and behaviours is a context even more invisibilised, an issue also relevant to HIV prevention. An unknown proportion of males experience male-to-male sex while young, often before male-to-female sex and often with family relatives such as cousins or uncles, or even with friends. Such behaviours are outside the “public environments” taking place in neighbourhoods, private homes, hostels, guest houses, hotels, and a range of vendors shops and other private places. Here the contexts may well play out a *kothi/panthi* framework, but often it is where access, immediacy and opportunity play a significant role in prevalence of this behaviour. Very often both of the partners involved in the sexual activity do not express a sexualised identity, but rather speak of need and urgency, “the heat of the moment”, or “I did it in my sleep”.

Some may well find that their experience of sex between men resonates with their own sexual desires and gender role preferences, and should they meet with *kothis*, develop their own *kothi* identity. Others give no voice or name to their experiences, and may well stop upon marriage, or continue in their neighbourhoods with local *kothis* and boys.

Kothis by their very number, “nature” and practices have access to a broad range of other males whom they access for sex, and can be seen as an entry point to the dominant framework of men who have sex with males in Bangladesh and India.

Perhaps where the term “behaviourally homosexual” has been used by UNAIDS and others, we should use the term “behavioural heterosexual” as well to get even a glimpse of the range of masculinities, male sexual behaviours, genders, identities, and the multiplicity of male to male sexual frameworks.

Situational Identities

Such beliefs and practices lead many *kothis* to act out what could be called situational identities. That is, within the family home and neighbourhood they will perform as young (or not so young) men, while in specific environments, they will perform as *kothis* with other *kothis*, or to draw the attention of potential "manly" male sexual partners. This behaviour often involves an exaggerated sway of the hips, loose wrist actions, eye movements, touching the mouth with a finger, use of *ulti* and so on. These gestures demonstrate sexual availability to the *panthis*.

Situational identities act as a device to invisibilise identity choices, desire and behaviours, maintain social and family stability, and reduce levels of tension, potential harassment, and violence. This also means that the *kothi* identity has a significant level of performance as part of it. This has been clearly borne out in a range of the discussions where several *kothi*-identified males stated that they performed as a *kothi* with other *kothis* to be able to be a part of a social network that accepted them, rather than because of their sexual behaviour and identity choice, i.e. they saw themselves as men with both “active” and “passive” sexual encounters.

Support and friendship systems

For *kothis* their key support and friendship systems are provided by other *kothis* and their own families. This also expresses the gendered framework with which the majority of *kothis* identify with, as well as the living out situational identities.

In Bangladesh and Indian cultural systems, men and women rarely make friendships. The public arena is male dominated. And male to male friendships are expressed in the public domain.

But *kothis* see men as potential *panthis*, and often treat them as such. It is seen as rare for a *kothi* to develop a non-sexual friendship with a “man”. *Kothis* expressed the

desire to “find a husband”, but even in this context *kothis* recognised that this “husband” will get married and live with his wife.

In a situational context *kothis* will perform as males in other public contexts and in the home, and thus will develop friendships with other neighbourhood males and relatives keeping his identity choice and sexual behaviour secret. But even in this arena, *kothis* sometimes speak of sex with friends, with these male friends. But never, never, with another *kothi*.

Support systems tended to be expressed within a narrow arena of *kothi* friendship networks, usually in a public environment, although sometimes *kothis* will visit other *kothis* at their homes, particularly so when that *kothi* has a room to himself. Here again this space can often become sexualised as *kothi* friends will bring their *panthis* to access the privacy of the space.

Kothis who have strong bonded relationships, will often call each other in feminine relationship terms, such as sister, aunty, mother, and so on.

Here there are several lateral and vertical relationships based on female family structures, which requires acknowledgement, but sometimes it also generates “sibling” rivalry and discord over access to apparel, make-up, appearances, and potential sex partners.

Kothis will always turn to other *kothis* for moral, emotional and financial support where the family could not, or would not provide this.

Family

Joint and extended familial links are strongly held together by custom, tradition, belief, practice and economic need. Their value lie in providing a form of social security and welfare in a society that has neither. The elders are supported, as often 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. For example, leaving a small town or village to migrate to a major city for work, the individual will often stay with an extended family member already in that city.

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. Personal choice and desire becomes subsumed within family choice and desire. Marriage, children and duty to parents is the focus.

Marriage

In South Asia, marriage is a social, cultural and religious necessity, a central issue within people's lives and a mainstay of family and community life. It should be seen as a socially and religiously compulsory duty towards maintaining family and community bonds. Marital status signifies adulthood, social responsibility and the achievement of personhood.

Traditionally, marriages are arranged between two extended families. Such arrangements are based around economic and inter-family connections. In urban environments there may be a matter of choice and concepts of "love marriage" are growing in the middle classes, but ultimately marriage is no choice. As Herdt states in his book *Same Sex Cultures*, "full personhood is not achievable until people have married and produced children". (p5).

To remain unmarried is often seen by the family and others as an aberration, a sickness, bringing shame and dishonour upon the family, creating social and family disorder. To have no children can be seen as a curse.

But such marriages are not usually based on mutual friendship, desire and love. Extremely few of married MSM have informed their wives about their extra-marital behaviour with other males, or for that fact, other woman. They believe that all they need to do is to function adequately as husbands in terms of economic support for their wives and engage in sexual intercourse in order to have children. Marriage is considered a duty and sex with one's wife as a means to have children.

The wife is seen as the bearer and mother of his children, not as a friend and lover. Marriages are not seen as companionate and egalitarian. And because of the dominant male ideology and male social spaces, a male should be seen spending more times with other males, otherwise he would be seen as being weak and perhaps "womanly".

Psychosexual issues

Sex education is largely absent. Knowledge of the male and female bodies, of reproduction, of the sex organs, is almost non-existent.

This leads to a variety of myths, beliefs and practices which are accepted as true and helpful. A considerable tension exists regarding masturbation as a source of body and mental weakness, that reduce the virility and functioning of the penis, if not producing damage of one sort or another. Constantly questions are asked about medical treatment for nocturnal emissions, masturbation, penile sizes and shapes. Many men use “quack” remedies from street vendors for their perceived weaknesses.

At the same time, the lack of knowledge of their own and female bodies lead to a range of risky practices, such as rapid discharge, or anal or vaginal bleeding, achieved through dry and rapid penetrative acts.

Reproduction also carries its own myths and beliefs, where many young males have no idea how babies are born, or even formed.

Gender

In terms of men who have sex with men there appears to be a range of masculinities, a spectrum of possibilities, where at one end are *hijras*, then *kothis* and then what *kothis* define as “real men”, *panthis*. *Kothis* are not men believing they are women, or even want to become women. They appear to see themselves as “less than men”. but “more than women”. While they identify with the feminine, much of the identification is around performance as a means to attract these “real men” as sexual partners.

Male and female gender roles are strictly divided through sexual positions, appearance and dress, mannerisms, and work functions. These roles are hierarchical and oppositional. Women are “passive”, “servile”, “domiciled”, wife and mother. *Kothis*, through their gender identification are also supposed to “passive”, “servile”, “domiciled” and “wife” to their *panthis*. Many *kothis* speak of “finding a husband”, seeking for a “real man” with an “akka likam” (meaning a big penis).

But there are often intense contradictions here. *Kothis* in a public space (like *hijras*) can be extremely voluble, sexually assertive (it is often the *kothi* who usually approach the *panthi* in the cruising sites), and will often dominate the sex act, even though he is being penetrated. And it should be recognised that many *kothis* also play the role of husband and father with their wives.

It cannot be taken as a given that because *kothis* identify with the feminine, that they only take the receptive role in the sex act, and use feminine terms for each other, that they are passive. There is much diversity in all of this.

But it should be recognised that because *kothis* play out the socially accepted gender roles, that their self-definitions, language and behaviours sustains a patriarchal framework of gendered relationships and sexual behaviours, this increases their risk of STI/HIV infection and transmission.