

**There are no heterosexuals in India.....
there are only married men and men who will get married**

April 1998

At the 4th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific that was held between 25th - 29th October, 1997 in Manila, Philippines, I had been asked to present a paper on males who have sex with males in South Asia. As part of the ensuing debate I had jokingly made a comment that "there were no heterosexuals in India (South Asia). There was a pregnant pause and then I went on to say ".... there are only married men and men who will get married!"

A few of the Indian delegates became rather agitated, believing that my statement reflecting on perhaps ..."the virility of Indian men" or that I was "impugning Indian men" or even that "I was casting aspirations on Indian men". There seemed to be a whiff of "homophobia" about these responses.

However, it seemed to me that, like audiences anywhere in the world, it was only the first part of my statement that had been heard, not the follow on.

Whilst I expressed this sentiment as a joke, there was a serious element to its content.

We need to break down the statement into its two components to fully appreciate what I was trying to say in this off-the-cuff remark.

Part One: "There are no heterosexuals in India....."

This specifically relates to the historical construction of the term heterosexual (which actually followed the invention of the word homosexual), and its use in cultures very different from those of Europe and America where this word was first used in May 1892 by Dr. James G. Hiernan in a Chicago medical Journal (see Jonathan Ned Katz. The invention of heterosexuality, Dutton, 1997, p19).

I quote: "Heterosexual was not equated here with normal sex, but with perversion - a definitional tradition that lasted in middle class-culture into the 1920s....."

"Heterosexuals experience so-called male erotic attraction to females and so-called female erotic attraction to males. That is, these heterosexuals periodically felt 'inclination to both sexes. The hetero in these heterosexuals referred not to their

interest in a different sex, but to their desire for two different sexes. Feeling desire inappropriate, supposedly, for their sex, these heterosexuals were guilty of what we now think of as gender and erotic deviance.

"Heterosexuals were also guilty of reproductive deviance. That is, they betrayed inclinations to "abnormal methods of gratification" - modes of pleasure without reproducing the species. They also demonstrated "traces of the normal sexual appetite" - a touch of the desire to reproduce."

Non-reproductive sex was defined in this time as "pathological sexual instinct" and "contrary sexual instinct", whereas the "sexual instinct" was reproductive sex.

Since those days, the explicit reference to reproductive sex within the term heterosexual has changed. It has become implicit. An invisible a-prior assumption that "normative sex" is only that which can "produce babies". For example, the infamous Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, the same as that which exists in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and with some explicit modifications in Sri Lanka, states:

"OF UNNATURAL OFFENCES: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life or imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall be liable to fine.

Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section."

Specifically the act is referring to all forms of non-reproductive sex. However this act, because the way it has been used historically in the British Empire was usually targeted at non-reproductive sex between males, although male and female couplings were not always exempt. The act has therefore been interpreted as against "homosexuality".

Here we have the ever present confusion between being and doing. The psychological condition of "being a homosexual" and that of "doing homosexual behaviour" whatever that means.

This confusion pervades the whole debate about heterosexual/homosexual, constructions of the self that are socially framed, medicalised and institutionalised. It is, I believe, problematic, if not downright dangerous, in the debate on so called heterosexual or homosexual transmission of HIV and STDs, particularly in Asian countries.

Adoption of these Western terms of sexuality, of confusing identity with behaviour in terms of epidemiology, and all their historical constructions actually increases the invisibilisation of male to male sexual behaviours, because these terms carry frameworks of identities that historically have not existed in Asian countries, until recently where they are just beginning to merge, primarily amongst the upper middle classes, as consumerist and market oriented cultures evolve.

Thus the statement "*there are no heterosexuals in India ...*" was an explicit way of saying that for the vast numbers of Indians and others from the South Asian (if not for all of Asia), constructions of the self do not follow Western ideologies, and are different. It was saying that the word "heterosexual" has arisen from a different culture, different histories, different religion. It was a short-hand way of stating that direct transposition of terms from one culture to another without clarifying meaning and content can cause more confusion and in the context of HIV/AIDS, cause more damage than progress in halting the epidemic. What is the Hindi translation of the word heterosexual? Or the Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati, Bengali, Tamil, and so on. Do these "equivalents" share the same meaning and context as the word heterosexual appears to do?

Part Two: ".....there are only married men and men going to get married!"

South Asian identities are not based upon which gender you have sex with. They are based upon socialisation frameworks and expectations, social, cultural and religious expectations arising from community and family structures, beliefs, traditions, religion and customs.

South Asian societies construct a social identity **not** based upon the individuality (which in the West evolved into individual identities of personhood, adulthood, male and femalehood and thus into so-called heterosexuals and homosexuals - and perhaps bisexuals) but upon intra-family relationships, marriage and children. Full personhood is not achieved until marriage and children are produced. Adulthood was defined by this.

In South Asia, marriage and children are central to self-definition. The religious, social and cultural traditions and beliefs demand marriage and the production of children, particularly sons. " May you be the mother of a hundred sons" is a statement given to many a newly married bride.

To remain unmarried would often be seen as an aberration - a sickness. An unmarried status is only sanctioned by the religious, a sanyasan, an ascetic, someone who devotes his life to the search for the sacred.

In this context then, my statement reflects a reality that is specific to India and other South Asian cultures. Reproductive sex as the normative behaviour within a marriage that reflects the joint and extended family. It is within this framework that the term heterosexual may be explored - perhaps. And since the issue is reproductive sexuality, we are talking of vaginal sex. But what about options for non reproductive sex? What about anal sex between males and females. Or oral sex?

Certainly in the social constructions of sexual behaviours in South Asia, we have found that for the majority of male to male sexual encounters, there is no significant patterning of sexual identities, except perhaps for those who define themselves through the act of anal penetration. What terms of identities that do exist for those who do the penetrating arise from the penetrated themselves.

Local patterns of male to male sex are not an exclusive practice of a few "homosexual" men, but are a part of the general sexual practices of a significant number of males in South Asia and symptomatic of male homosociability and homoaffectionalism in South Asian cultures, where public shame and masculine dishonour configure denial and invisibility.

Such frameworks have additional constraints arising from patriarchal structures creating the public domain as a male space, gender segregation, females as vessels of male honour, male homosociability, compulsory marriage and procreation engendered through family and community pressure, lack of welfare social structures, poverty driven economics and personal survival strategies, huge population levels, and mass movements of males from rural to urban areas for employment, as well as the extremely low status of females.

So what is heterosexuality in India? What does homosexuality mean in India? What relevance do these terms have to the lived expressions of those experience male to male sexual behaviours? Very little according to the evidence.

