

Kothis, gays and (other) MSM

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In the July 2000 edition of *Trikone* (Vol. 15, No.3), an article by Owais Khan was published: *A Rose By Any Other Name...? Gay vs MSM.*

A key implication in this article was that the word gay and the phrase men who have sex with men were too often been seen as interchangeable, synonymous and equivalent by those working in the field of sexual health. This is having the effect of invisibilizing the lesbian and gay struggle in India, or as is quoted "a well thought out game plan not to let autonomous gay identities become visible...."

This is a very distressing reading of the issue, particularly for those who are involved in fighting AIDS among those many men/males who do not identify as gay, but who have sex with other men.

In a country of one billion people, with some 520 million males (it is estimated that in India there are 50 million more males than females - who are they having sex with?) where over 5 million people are reported to be living with HIV/AIDS, and where this number is rapidly increasing, this confusion between identity politics and HIV/AIDS concerns is distressing. Distressing because what we surely should be talking about is how we can all work and support each other in saving lives, not what labels we give ourselves, or impose upon others.

So what is this word gay that we bandy about so readily as a means of self-identity and expression? What does it mean? Is it a noun, an adjective or a verb? In South Asia I have heard the term used in all these ways. I am gay, I am a gay, I do gaysex (or homosex). What does it mean when a person says "I am gay". And in South Asia who says I am gay? The truckdriver who may have sex with his male helper? The farmer in the village who has sex with a young man, the rickshaw driver who has sex with a hijra? The slum dweller when he has sex with a kothi? What about male sex workers? What about male prisoners, jawans, males in hostel, lodgings, street males, labourers. Or is it the middle-class urbanite with access to the English language press, *Trikone*, email and the internet? Ask ourselves this. How many people in South Asia speak and read English? How many people in South Asia can be defined as the middle or upper classes? How many people live in cities. How many people live below the poverty line? How many people are literate, even in their own language?

If I understand gay history correctly, the word gay arose as a means of developing a sense of positive identity as a loci for the self, where a core sense of self was constructed around sexual desire and longing. We were no longer faggots, queens, fairies, perverts, homosexuals. We were gay. Here the concept involved a masculinising process. We were men who loved other men a framework of same gender/same sex relationships.

In other words I am gay because as a man I desire other men because they are men with specific attributes that I like, i.e. handsome, intelligent, good personality and so on. And in the context of the evolution of sexual identities and encounters from Western constructions, gay relationships reflected heterosexual (another Western constructed term) frameworks of relationships. That is these relationships were companionate, egalitarian and mutual.

The word gay came into general use in the mid-fifties and sixties, particularly after the Stonewall riots in New York. The word homosexual was invented in the 19th century as term that particularised behaviour into an identity. Likewise the word heterosexual was also invented in the late 19th century, much later than its oppositional term, and only was it in the 1920s that it took on the meanings that we attribute to it. Likewise identity politics arose in the States and has become a global feature since then, a globalising culture that sweeps indigenous identities and constructions of sexuality and gender before it.

The terms gay, homosexual, heterosexual have a history. They are social constructions that arise from a specific context and sociocultural frameworks and a past. To claim some universality of identity across different cultures and histories is a claim of arrogance. Perhaps we can call it the Coco-Cola of sexual and gender politics.

So let me ask readers of TriKone this. In what ways do sexual relationships exist in South Asia, whether between males or males and females. In what context is marriage framed. Are primary sexual relationships egalitarian and companionate? Have they ever been for the majority of people. Are marriages freely chosen? Is there gender equality and individuality? And if there is, for whom? And what does this say about the way sexualities are constructed in the sociocultural frameworks of South Asia?

What does the word "man" mean to most biological males in South Asia? In what context is it used? What defines manhood, manliness and masculinity? So what does it mean when a kothi-identified male say's "I am looking for a 'real' man as a husband".

What does it mean when a husband says he "does duty to his wife" rather than saying he has sex with his wife. What significance does this have on sociocultural constructions of sex, male to male sex, male to female sex?

The word male used in the phrase male to male signifies something else than just transgenerational sex (or paedophilia), particularly in the context of the risks of HIV infection through anal sex. It signifies that there are specific cultural differences in our understanding of the word 'sex', and the word 'man'. Do all kothis see themselves as men? Do hijras see themselves as men? Do young *unmarried* males from "lower class" groups, whether rural and urban, define themselves culturally as "men"? Do panthis see kothis as men? Here the differences between biological definitions and cultural interpretations must be understood, if we are going to make any headway of empowering reducing behavioural risks.

In South Asia the sociocultural frameworks are supremely gendered, and often sexual relationships are framed by gender roles, power relationships, poverty, class, caste, tradition and custom, hierarchies of one sort or another. Here for many men/males we have gender identities, nor sexual identities.

The phrase males who have sex with males, or men who have sex with men is not about identities and desires, it is about recognising that there are many frameworks within which men/males have sex with men/males, many different self-identities, many different contexts of behaviour. Some will call themselves gay, some will say they are kothi, some will say they are do-paratha, dubli or double decker. But almost none will call themselves panthi. This is a kothi term for their manly partners.

Of course kothis get married. What 'man' in South Asia is not under intense pressure to marry. And how many are in a social and economic context in which they can refuse their family's pressure.

So what does this say if a kothi can get an erection and penetrate his wife? Does this stop himself identifying as a kothi? This is an indigenous term, not an imported word. *Uti*, the language of kothis and hijras across South Asia. I have heard similar phrases and concepts spoken in Sylhet, Bangladesh to Hyderabad, India, to Karachi, Pakistan.

I am not saying this is either good, bad or indifferent. It is the reality.

HIV/AIDS is a scourge whose primary victims are the poor, the disenfranchised, the marginalised. HIV is not transmitted by an identity. There is no such thing as a

heterosexual transmission or a homosexual transmission. It is primarily transmitted by unprotected anal or vaginal sex. Anal sex is not an exclusive behaviour of gay-identified men. There are other identities which involve anal sex as a core behaviour, and there are a significant proportion of males who are involved in anal sex behaviours who have no specific sexual identities. In fact whereas the Indian government speaks of heterosexual/homosexual transmission of HIV, they speak of a ratio of 80%/0.5%. Is this really valid? How many men/males who have anal sex with other men/males will tell a doctor that they have had anal sex with another man/male? No, of course they do not. They will usually state they had sex with a woman. The only way an agency can tell that the transmission is through "homosexual behaviour" from a positive result is if the male says that he has been anally penetrated, or is a homosexual, or is gay. And of course the issue of anal sex between men and women is not addressed.

The article is in reality a discussion around essentialism vs constructionism as frameworks for sexual behaviours and identities. But I wonder, if those working in the field of HIV/AIDS and 'MSM' should only work with gay-identified men because they do not accept the concept that non-gay-identified can also have sex with other men. AND then where does this lead us to? Is sexual behaviour only equivalent to gender desires? Or specifically equivalent to a sexual identity?

Looking from this perspective in terms of social constructionist theories, what we have in South Asia are cultures in which so many men are behaviourally heterosexual and/or behaviourally homosexual. I see South Asian countries as emergent heterosexual societies, along with emergent gay constructions/communities. There many others with differing identities that have a longer history in the region than does gay politics. All these frameworks are equally valid. In the meantime, HIV/AIDS is about the reality of where people are right now, what they do with their own bodies, what they identify with, how they perceive themselves, and also how they perceive what they do.

In Western cultures so much work has been done in exploring queerness as a framework for the presence or absence of sexual identities, their fluidity and often amorphousness, a space with no boundaries. A tremendous amount of work has been done on the sociocultural constructions of gender, sexualities, masculinities and femininities. And yet this article appears to be ahistorical and ignores all this pioneering work. Is South Asia somehow so different from all the other cultures in the world so that it is outside these processes?

It is not gay vs MSM. It is gay men and MSM. And in South Asia I would have to say gay men, kothis and a variety of MSM. In the amazing diversity of male sexual

frameworks (and perhaps female as well), localised terminologies, identities and sensibilities become lost in the globalising of the term gay, a term that specifically arose from an Anglo-Saxon history and context.

A unnecessary conflict has developed where there is no need, one that is really phantasmagoric. There is no dispute. Maybe you are working within a context of emerging gay identities and gay rights, which can (but sometimes does not) include HIV/AIDS issues. Or maybe you are working in the field of saving lives from the scourge of AIDS amongst those most at risk and articulate issues in terms of sexual rights. Sometimes you are doing both.

In terms of actual risk, unprotected anal sex is the most risky sexual encounter. So some people may have differing priorities. Is this a problem? And if so, why?

In the context of AIDS, developing effective and sustainable prevention initiatives, one should not impose your own personal concepts of what people should call themselves, or what identity they should have. You start with where people are at, not where you think they should be, helping to create safe spaces where they can explore their sense of self as an empowerment process of change towards less risky behaviours.

South Asia has an incredible diversity of identities, desires, and frameworks of expression. It can truly be called a queer space. Hijras, transvestities, transgendered, gay-identified men, kothis/dangas, panthis/giriyas, double-deckers/do-parathas/dubli, men/males who have sex with other men/males, in all its variety of terminologies, behavioural choices, desires and constructions. Are we truly saying that we should reduce this diversity into the singular construction of a gay identity, a term that does not readily translate into the multiplicity of languages and dialects that reflect the diversity of South Asia itself?

And are we also saying that control of AIDS in South Asia does not matter, that people who do not identify with a gay sensibility do not matter? Behaviour and identity are not always congruent as any good social anthropologist should know.

Of course the emergent gay movement in South Asia is extremely important for those who do identify as gay, and also for those who are exploring their own emergent sexual sense of self and gayness and are looking for a positive affirming identity that makes sense to them. Then to say gay is appropriate and right. But at the same time to denigrate or deny other frameworks of identities and choices is not.

Let us stop seeing a debate that pits those who work for gay rights and those who work in preventing HIV/AIDS among men who have sex with men against each other. Let us work together whatever our own frameworks and priorities, and recognise that in a region of over one billion people there is space for everyone to work out their destinies.

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