

## **Human Rights and Sexual Citizenship**

*Men who have sex with men: A South Asian Perspective*

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Much contemporary discussion of human rights, sexual citizenship and HIV/AIDS is conducted in English within a Eurocentric framework that defines the individual as paramount, and that sees risk as an individuated concern.

This debate has usually been led by activists from the field of lesbian and gay rights and those who work with singularly marginalised groups and networks, primarily female sex workers and injecting drug users.

Working with men who have sex with men in South Asia the question may well be one of how relevant these arguments are in a sociocultural context where frameworks of male to male sex which not neatly divided into a heterosexual/homosexual binary and oppositional dynamic. Here notions of community, religion and social reciprocity are very different than commonly found in Europe.

This article will not be able to give an answer to this question at this point. I am not even sure that I have an answer.

In 1996 Naz Foundation International was formed, whose remit was to support the development of local sexual health projects for men who have sex with men in the South Asia region. Since then this network has developed some 16 projects who between them have reached nearly half a million MSM, primarily from poor backgrounds. In support of these projects and programmes we have also conducted a range of situational assessments in different cities and interviewed over 2000 MSM.

We sought to find solutions for empowering behaviour change, to reduce risks for both STI and HIV infections. We explored meanings and significances around behavioural choices, self-identities, practices, and social frameworks.

What became clear was that the terms sexual minorities, sexual citizenship, human rights, personal choice, sexual identity, and so on had almost no meaning or significance to a significant number MSM. If anything, action on these fronts were often seen as threatening and socially divisive.

The debate therefore appeared to be one of the blind talking to the blind about how beautiful the sunset was.

Let me summarise some of our findings in terms of men who have sex with men in South Asia.

The concept of the individual as the paramount figure as in Western societies just does not have significance in South Asia cultures.

From Athenian democracy to Queer politics in the West, at each stage of the struggle for rights, concepts of who was human, who was an autonomous individual with personal rights, expanded. This development involved a world view, meanings and significances that arise from Western history, cultures, religions and traditions.

For the majority of South Asians who live and exist within their own languages, cultures, histories, traditions and religions, these meanings and significances will be different. The individual, as an autonomous person is not a part of this world view or felt experience.

Here identity may not be based on individuality and personhood. It is relational, gender based, and arises from reproductivity.

Thus a man is not only socially defined by biology and age. He is also predominately defined by familial relations, social behaviours, marital status, and male reproductivity.

Religion, family, and community are intertwined in a way almost impossible to separate out as different fields of experience.

A woman is a woman because she is married and has a son. An adult is an adult because he performs his family, community and religious duties, gets married and continues his lineage. It is a complex interweaving of mutual obligations and roles through which one can achieve manhood, womanhood, adulthood, and citizenship.

In such a context, from the research we have done, over 90% of men who have sex with men were either married, or claim that they will get married. Marriage may be delayed till the late thirties and forties. But marriage is the paramount backdrop to their lives.

Within this context there is of course variations on a theme. It is possible to have differing behaviours and choices, but they are circumscribed within the limitations described above. Many families will absorb these difference if they are "invisible" and do not create shame for the family.

This leads to another significant difference. Shame, as the primary social control mechanism. It needs to be recognised that shame and guilt are very different mechanisms for social control. Guilt an internalised self-perception of assumed wrong doing. Shame as an externalised perception of "not fitting in". They may generate similar feelings if despair and isolation, but their meanings and significances are very different.

Within a culture that validates relational identities and the meanings it gives to concepts of maleness and femaleness, that equates the penetrator as a man, and the penetrated as not man, what perhaps can be termed a sexual identity does exist, but only for those males who are penetrated and create a performative role around the desire to be penetrated. The kothi is an easily recognised social and personal role and identity that can be seen in many "cruising" sites in South Asian parks, toilets and neighbourhoods. To a significant extent the kothi role is also a relational role, both in terms of other kothi-identified males, and to his sexual partners whom he calls panthis.

To the panthis, the males he penetrates are not perceived as men, but as not men. Therefore he cannot perceive himself as homosexual, gay, a man who has sex with other men, or whatever terminology we generate. In the social milieu that Naz Foundation International works in such terms would be often not be understand to have any significant meaning. The penetrator is a man. Full stop. His identity is also relational - in the context of family, neighbourhood, parenthood, and community.

Even these feminised males, kothis, will get married, and have children. When we looked at their marital sexual activities, what we discovered was counter-intuitive. The frequency of sexual acts with their wives was about the same as those of the panthis.

So what do we have. A sense of self not based on autonomous individuality, but arises from relational contexts. Where personhood is defined in terms of family, marriage and reproduction.

The fight for lesbian and gay rights has been perceived by some as a means to destroy South Asian cultural frameworks and develop a mimicry of Western cultures, for it promotes the autonomous individual in societies with no social welfare system other than that provided by the family.

Further, for some, arguments for lesbian and gay rights are sustained through the concept of a sexual minority, whereas behaviourally in South Asia male to male sex may not be a minority behaviour. In the West, sex acts are definitional linked with a sexual identity or orientation. But there is growing evidence which indicates that this might not be true in South Asia for everyone.

This issue is also tied up with globalisation as a planetary phenomena to which there is a considerable resistance.

Further it assumes that our societies are divided into separated heterosexual and homosexual worlds as an essentialist and global construction. But ... I wonder. In South Asia I have often termed our societies as being emergent heterosexual societies in the whole globalising process. And that what we have are primarily behaviourally heterosexual societies (if Ned Kantz is right in his book, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*).

So what possible way forward for us?

I am coming to believe that in the South Asian context we should frame the arguments differently, in ways that are meaningful for everybody, not just those MSM who have developed a gay identity, who speak English and roam the world through the internet. Arguments should also be accessed by those less privileged and take root in their lives.

For many it is to have the choice NOT to get married without being victimised and marginalised. This is true for both men and women

Special pleading on behalf of being a minority may be self-defeating in a region full of minorities who are marginalised and stigmatised. Here women are also a minority, children, so-called backward castes, religious affiliations, and so on. To do so often means that we cannot carry everyone with us. It builds to a concept of a hierarchy of oppression.

Further rights being argued from a perspective of a perceived sexual minority also re-emphasises a heterosexual/homosexual divide that is oppositional, hierarchical, oppressive and exclusivist.

The real battle I believe is around beliefs and traditions of masculinity and femininity and the linking of the socially defined characteristics in terms of manhood and womanhood with the allied belief in opposition and hierarchy. And of the beliefs that sees individuality and community as oppositional, and a sexual exclusivity as the central basis of a sexual identity.

Here we have to challenge the notions of patriarchy as never before and the right to own one's body. The right to be free to be who we are.

But we are far from that. We urgently need to discover how to articulate the queerness of South Asia within its own languages and perspectives, its own traditions and cultures. From its own soul. We need to redefine the social meanings of community and affiliation, to develop concepts of individuated rights that reflect a value system based on community and resistance to patriarchy.

Any ideas?