

MSM in South Asia

Shivananda Khan

December 2003

Sexual identities, masculinities and sexualities take shape within psychosocial and historical processes, which in turn are contextualised by religion, culture and language. Different cultures will often contextualise similar words and phenomena so as to take on different meanings with inherent subtleties typical of that culture. This is true of the South Asia region. While having several countries the region shares a history and certain cultural and religious values that enables us to determine some common denominators within the phenomena of male-to-male sex.

In this context, and from the evidence, Euro-American understandings and discourses on “gay identities”, heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, or even the use of the term “sexual minorities” are misleading, and actual invisibilises to a significant extent the range and level of male-to-male sexual activities and those involved in them.

South Asian cultures are supremely patriarchal, gendered and hierarchal, so that the word MAN is defined not so much by biological age, but by gender roles and performance, religious rituals and family duties and obligations. Those who fall outside such normative masculinity would not be defined as MAN, but as NOT-MAN. In this situation, the penetrated sexual partner is seen as NOT-MAN, while the penetrator perceives himself, and is perceived by others, as MAN.

This perception is further reinforced by socio-cultural realities as the invisibilisation of sexual behaviors, gender segregation, social policing of women, an acceptability of male homosociability and homoaffectionalism, male dominance over public space and public discourse, a culture of shame where family and community respect and honour holds sway, compulsory and arranged marriage, pressure of reproduction (particularly of male children), understanding of sex only in a reproductive sense, joint and extended families, and the negation of the self before the community/family. This behavior is further defined by gender roles attributed to males and females within society, especially when important defining events in life like assumption of adult-hood are defined by such gender roles.

In such phallo-centric patriarchal cultures with sex defined reproductively, masculinity is defined by the act of sexual penetration and not be “sexual orientation”. Those who are penetrated would this be perceived as less worthy, feminised, debased males, and would be highly stigmatised leading to a range of violence and abuses, as well as sexual accessibility without diminishing the masculinity of the penetrator. The male penetrator is not deviant and is a part of the general male population. It is the penetrated who is subjected to the perception of deviancy.

However, within a homosocial and homoaffectionalist culture, along with the general invisibility of sexual behaviours, sexual boundaries between males can be easily crossed in appropriate spaces, at the appropriate time, “under the blanket”, and “in the dark”.

What seems to exist are a range of masculinities and genders with differing contextualisation of sexual behaviours, sex partner choices, perceived sexual needs, pleasures and desires.

While for some MSM there are frameworks of specific male-to-male desire (based on object choice/gender), gendered identities and visibility which may make it easier to access and quantify numbers, for others who sexually access these males and whose desires are based around discharge and specific sex acts (and perhaps sexual object choice), and who perceive themselves as 'manly' and 'normal men', it will be almost impossible to quantify. It could be any 'manly' male given the right situation and context.

The frameworks of male to male sex, often substantially divergent and exclusive, involve males who self-identify as *zenanas/kothis/metis* and are usually penetrated, males/men who take on the penetrating role in male to male sex (known as *giryas/panthis/tas* by *zenanas/kothis/metis*) accessing *zenanas/kothis/metis*, *hijras*, and at times, adolescent males. These males are usually perceived by *giryas/panthis* as feminised males/females, which enables the *giryas/panthis* to maintain his sense of manliness and be seen as a part of the normative male society. Other dynamics include males who access other males for discharge and/or desire to be penetrated, males who desire male to male sex and do not gender themselves and usually indulge in mutual sexual activity - 'giving and taking', friends have sex with friends for mutual pleasure, and males in all male institutions. Amongst the educated and urban elite, a Western gay sensibility and community is also emerging in parallel to this.

These networks of differing MSM contexts may at times inter-penetrate, where individuals may shift along differing networks, but usually they are mutually exclusive. In other words there are complex dynamics and diffusion in relation to male-to-male sex.

The most visible of these networks are those involving *zenanas/kothis/metis* and *hijras* because of their public performative role, which is a part of their self-identification. In some cities in South Asia there will also be *malishas* (males who give massage) and other normative masculine males working as male-to-male sex workers.

This, of course, does not tell the whole story of male-to-male sexual behaviours in the region.

Male-to-male sex work is a significant factor in South Asian cities. A broad range of frameworks also exists here. *Hijras*, *zenanas/kothis/metis*, *malishas*, male youth, and other males, will sell sex to men because of poverty and unemployment. Without a welfare system, and with significant levels of unemployment or low level incomes, male sex work can be a way out in terms of supporting the self and family. This is not to imply that males involved in sex work do not enjoy the sex with other males. Often they will also have a regular partner - a *pucca dost/parik*.

It needs to be recognised that the male being anally penetrated by another male is highly

stigmatised and those who are perceived to be recipients are usually treated with contempt. A *girya/panthi* or *malishia* or any man/male who is sexually penetrated, orally or anally, will make extensive efforts to hide his practice and/or desire, both from his friends as well as from *zenanas/kothis/metis* and others in their sexual networks to avoid such stigmatisation. It cannot be assumed that gendered sex roles are exclusively maintained at all times. It further needs to be recognized that a similar crossing of “gendered” boundaries exists amongst *zenanas/kothis/metis*. It is also not unknown for some *zenana/kothi/meti*-identified males to also penetrate other males. But like the penetrated *giraya*, this behaviour would also be kept secret from other *zenanas/kothis*.

Such stigmatization further produces a range of human rights abuses, blackmail, violence, and male-on-male rape by local men, thugs and beat constables.

While there were substantial networks of *zenanas/kothis/metis* of all gradations in urban centres - from the very feminised and cross-dressing type to those who have moustaches and dress in shirt and trousers - their sexual partners could well be any masculine male.

Malishias and other similar male sex workers are not only being accessed by men for masturbation and discharge as part of the massage process, they were also being accessed by males across the economic and class spectrum for penetrative sex. Women also access many of these *malishias* for sex.

There are other networks of male-to-male sex, not only in a range of male only institutions, or between young male friends in neighbourhoods, but also between older men and adolescent boys. These frameworks can be seen within contexts of

- a. desire for a specific sexual act, i.e. anal sex
- b. ‘body heat’ that requires discharge
- c. mutual desire for male-to-male sex
- d. desire for adolescent boys known in the historical literature as “beardless youths”

Accessing masculine male sexual partners is not considered difficult. All urban areas appear to have sexualized spaces, such as parks, toilets, railway and bus stations, specific bazaars, streets, and other public areas where *zenanas/kothis/metis* would go to meet potential *giryas/panthis*, often marketing sexual availability through their feminised social behaviours. Many ‘real men’ also go to these sites, not only to meet such accessible males, but often for quite legitimate purposes, where they can get caught up “in the heat of the moment” and access *zenanas/kothis/metis* there at the time.

What is clearly seen is that language, behaviour, and identity is to a large extent gendered, within a hidden context of polymorphous behaviours, and that behaviour and sexual practice are more significant markers for the majority of males involved in male-to-male sex than a specific sexual identity. In a way it could be said that there are limited numbers of MSM with specific gay/homosexual identities, but significant levels with a gendered identity or with perceived masculine ‘body needs’ which shaped sexual practices.

One more point needs to be made. Relationships between the various networks (I use this term advisedly rather than groups) are often self-stigmatising, tense and sometimes abusive because of the social construct of penetration being seen as equivalent to feminising. Gender 'politics' and relationships come to the fore. Thus *malishias*/masculine male sex workers may abuse *zenanas/kothis/metis* because of their feminisation, *zenanas/kothis/metis* will abuse male sex workers because they also are penetrated, *giryas/panthis* abuse *zenanas/kothis/metis*, and substantial tensions exist between *hijras* and *zenanas/kothis*, since *zenanas/kothis* are not castrated. These tensions can explode into verbal and physical abuse at times.

The issue of female sexual health is also highly pertinent. Cultural tradition makes marriage socially compulsory. Many MSM, of whatever framework or gender identification, are married or going to be married, even those who self-identified as *zenanas/kothis/metis*. Many manly sex partners from the general male population would also be married or going to be married.