

Males who have sex with males in South Asia

Introduction

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

The question appears to be reasonable on the surface, but it actually represents a misconception in terms of the social construction of MSM behaviours and identities.

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 properly answered with any adequate response or accuracy. In this context we should really be talking about male-to-male sexual behaviours rather than specifically men who have sex with men.

The issue of MSM is much more complex, diverse and often counter-intuitive.

In summary what we can say about male-to-male behaviours in South Asia is that:

- For many males involved in male to male sex, MSM is not about a sexual identity but most often a behaviour arising from a feminine gender identification, or a perceived “manly” discharge need. Such behaviours are not contextualised within a heterosexual - homosexual oppositional paradigm
- It appears to be that a significant level of MSM behaviours in South Asia is contextualised within a gendered framework - where a feminised gender performance frames the zenana/kothi.
- This gendered framework is constructed within a zenana/kothi/panthi/girya dynamic, where the kothi/zenana perceives himself and his desire for other males in the context of gender roles in South Asia, i.e. the “penetrated” partner. Kothis/zenanas construct their social roles, mannerisms and behaviours in ways which attract what they call panthis/giryas - “real men”, identifying as feminised males. In this context these kothis/zenanas are usually the visible MSM in a range of public environments and neighbourhoods, but panthis/giryas 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/zenanas. They penetrate kothis/zenanas who are not “real men” - they are kothis/zenanas.
- Kothis/zenanas see any male that is sexually penetrated as another kothi/zenana, whether they identify as gay, bisexual, or whatever. To kothi/zenana-identified males such identities represent a form of “closetness”.
- In other words there is 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/zenanas, 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/zenanas at a range of public sites, but this doesn't address the so-called "hidden kothis/zenanas" - the ones who are secret. Nor does this address the number of "manly" partners these kothis/zenanas access in arenas other than the public spaces of parks, railway stations, and so on.
- Beside the kothi/zenana 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 South Asia 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/zenana relationships, however, are based on gender roles - a "husband and wife" relationship. Kothis/zenanas are not friends with their panthis/giryas, but "wife". This is a relationship based on same sex/different gender identification dynamic. Kothis/zenanas make friends with other kothis/zenanas with whom they "never" (according to them) have sex with. For kothis/zenanas this would be like having sex with their sister.
- This does not mean that kothis/zenanas do not penetrate, or that panthis/giryas 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/zenanas have localised terms for such behaviours, for example in India, do-parathas, double-deckers, dubli, and so on, generally such individuals are looked upon with scorn
- Male sexual desire for another male should therefore be contextualised differently from male-to-male sexual behaviour.

The MSM Context in South Asia

Males who have sex with males (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 South Asia by donor agencies, NGOs and National AIDS Programmes. In South Asia, 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 Dr. 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 South Asia 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 (farsi - a derivative of the hijra language) which is unavailable to the majority population. These individuals call themselves kothis/zenanas, but this is a socialising and socialised role, where a “new” kothi/zenana with emergent sexual desires for other males (and often not so emergent, but in full force) will make friends with “older” kothis/zenanas and learn the characteristics, roles, behaviours (including sexual), mannerisms and language. And it is this kothi/zenanas 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/zenanas see themselves as the feminine in a masculine/feminine sexual partnership, and play out the perceived gender role in the culture. Most kothis/zenanas feel relatively comfortable with their choice, although expressing a varying degree of shame in terms of the shame-based culture of India. Those men who access these kothis/zenanas for sex, and sometimes for sexual relationships and partnerships, are seen as “real men” by the kothis/zenanas, 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/zenanas. 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/zenanas 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/zenanas speak of all men as potential panthis/giryas, 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 kothis/zenanas take oral contraceptives (many can’t afford, or can’t access, hormone injections) as a means of developing breasts, stating that panthis/giryas 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/giryas as sexual partners.

Sociocultural, religious and family pressure ensure that the majority of kothis/zenanas 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 even sometimes use female sex workers “for practice”.

Some of the kothis/zenanas from low-income groups become sex workers as a source of generating 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.

Panthis/giryas 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/zenanas.

And of course all panthis/giryas will either be married or will get married eventually, fulfilling the social, religious and family expectations for all men in South Asian cultures.

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/zenana/panthi/girya 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/zenanas, 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/zenanas 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/zenanas 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/zenanas with other kothis/zenanas, 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 uli and so on. These gestures demonstrate sexual availability to the panthis/giryas.

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/zenanas-identified males stated that they performed as a kothi/zenana with other kothis/zenana 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/zenanas 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 South Asian 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/zenanas see men as potential panthis/giryas, and often treat them as such. It is seen as rare for a kothi/zenana to develop a non-sexual friendship with a “man”. Kothis/zenanas expressed the desire to “find a husband”, but even in this context kothis/zenanas recognised that this “husband” will get married and live with his wife.

In a situational context kothis/zenanas will perform as men 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/zenanas

sometimes speak of sex with friends, with these male friends. But never, never with another kothi/zenana (so they say).

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

Kothis/zenanas 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/zenanas 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/zenana define as “real men”, panthis/giryas. Kothis/zenanas 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/zenanas, through their gender identification are also supposed to “passive”, “servile”, “domiciled” and “wife” to their panthis/giryas. Many kothis/zenanas 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/zenanas in a public space (like hijras) can be extremely voluble, sexually assertive (it is often the kothi/zenana 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/zenanas also play the role of husband and father with their wives.

It cannot be taken as a given that because kothis/zenanas 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/zenanas 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.