

Male intergenerational sexual relations in contemporary South Asia: India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan (and Pakistan)

Shivananda Khan OBE

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Cover slide

What a minefield this subject is. A whole language of stigma, criminalisation and abuse, along with a moral panic has arisen the last 30 years in the West when confronted with issues of intergenerational sex. And these beliefs and attitudes have been exported to South Asia along with Western constructions of childhood, adulthood, masculinity, male sexuality, psychology, psychiatry, along with the term child sexual abuse.

Paedophilia is now the new mortal sin and crime, often perceived as worse than murder. This term was coined to name what was perceived as a pathological condition back in the mid 1800's, labelling adult sexual attraction primarily or exclusively to prepubescent or peripubescent children. Thus a species was born, along with homosexuals, which at that time was the label for "inverts", or men who were sexually attracted to other men as receptive partners. The men who did the penetrating were not conceived as homosexuals then. So I suppose in today's parlance ancient Greek culture of the Socrates variety could be defined as paedophilic! And here the concept of

the child as expanded to include anyone below the age of 18, the majority of whom are post –puberty and sexual active.

When such meanings and significances have supposed to have universal application trans culturally, we run into all sorts of difficulties, where different cultures and societies have their own meanings and significances in how they construct masculinity, male sexuality, sexual practices, the male child, the male adult. What we really have here are masculinities and male sexualities.

Parallel to this development of the concept of male child sexual abuse, and to some extent interlinked with it, has been the development of specific lesbian and gay identities that reflect Western cultural meanings, and the internationalising of a lesbian and gay rights movement. In western understanding gayness reflect an understanding of egalitarianism, equality, and adulthood.

In South Asian societies, male-to-male sex is not constructed in terms of what we currently in the West would understand as homosexuality or gay identity, which is based on a binary system of man or woman, where same-sex attraction and desire is framed by same-gender desire. A man desires another man. Rather, much of male-to-male sex in the region is based on same-sex, but different gender desire along with penetrative sex roles. I had earlier spoke of the trinary gender system of man/not-man/woman. The person defined as not-man could be a boy, a feminised male, a young girl. The man is one who penetrates.

SLIDES 2 - 4

In one of our early studies conducted in Bangladesh in 1997-1998, we interviewed some 500 males/men who have sex with other males/men. All were 18 years and above. The data arising from this study has been confirmed by other studies conducted over the past 10 years across the South Asia region.

A brief word here on sexual/gender identities and sexual practice in South Asia.

SLIDES 5 - 10

Alongside and interlinked with these constructions of male-male sexualities based on gender performance and male adolescence, is that of *masti*, the belief that only vaginal sex is real sex, while all other types of semen discharge are not real, but play, mischief, with no significant meaning.

SLIDE 11

Here there are ideas that manly males cannot control their sexual “needs” and need sexual outlets. The concept of “body heat” and “necessary discharge” are common. And in societies where females are prized for their virginity, where male honour is based on female virginity, and where sexual access to females is highly controlled and socially policed, where can males find sexual release?

While several decades ago the marital age of many males was commonly about sixteen and for females by menarche, today, the average male marital age is about 27, and for the female 21. Between the time males reach puberty and the time they eventually can have legitimate sex is often ten years or more.

In such gender segregated, male dominated societies, where sex between males is not so much perceived as involving a condition of homosexuality, but revolve around concepts of gender roles and *masti*, opportunities for male-to-male sex are much more common than for male-female sex, even when married.

In the region, homoaffectionalism and homosocial environments produce a framework of easy-going companionship between adult males and between adult and adolescent males, where shared households and cramped living conditions produce ideal environments for early sexual encounters.

SLIDES 12 – 13

Here we see the age of first sexual encounter, and the gender of the first sexual partner, where significantly, the first sexual contact primarily was with another male.

SLIDE 14

When we explore the age of the first sexual contact by labelling, we find that the mean age of kothi-identified respondents was 10.4 and that of masculine males – panthis was 13.9, or at about puberty.

When asked why it was that kothi-identified males appeared to start having sex at such an early age, they commonly stated that it was because they were effeminate.

Further, when asked about how they felt about these early experiences, 15% of the respondents expressed feelings of outrage, while 85% expressed feelings from indifference to pleasure. Of these 85%, 62% just stated that this was a part of sexual play, normal, that every boy did it, and believed there was nothing wrong with it at their age.

Interestingly, many kothi-identified males also reported that even at these early ages, they tried to “seduce” their older partners until they gave in. One kothi even termed this “adult abuse”.

SLIDE 15

Thus, within the adolescent male population there were two subgroups, one that adopted feminised characteristics as their gender performance, and perceived themselves as less manly than other males, and the larger group that developed their gender performance as so-called normative males.

And what was the age of their sex partners?

SLIDE 16

And what did they do?

SLIDE 17

And who were these first sex partners?

SLIDE 18

You will notice the significant level of male relatives involved here.

SLIDE 19

Evidence clearly indicate that many males who have sex with males in South Asia have multiple partners, and for feminised males, it often averages anything between 10 – 20 different partners a month. And remember these partners are your normative males in the society.

We also wanted to compare current sexual partners with those at the first sex encounter.

SLIDE 20

While there has been a shift towards more strangers – which of course is to be expected – male relatives still form a significant percentage of sex partners in the previous month.

We still find a significant amount of male-male sex behaviour occurring in family environments, between uncles and nephews, cousins, and other male relatives. But for many, this is not perceived as real sex. It is *masti*. Real sex is between a husband and wife!

SLIDE 21

For many, sexual behaviour is not an expression of a personal identity, rather it is one of opportunity, accessibility, context, and an urgent desire for semen discharge. As one person in a sexual health workshop in Orissa told me, "I do duty to my wife", while women have often said "I do work with my husband".

SLIDE 22

In the context of the use of the term “tintergenerational sexual relations, how would the traditional patterns of male-male sexual acts in the old Sambian cultures, as written by Gilbert Herdt. Herdt reports on semen recipients and donors in some of these tribes, receptiveness being defined through oral or anal penetration. In a cult of masculinity where semen is seen as a masculine version of milk, young boys have to be nurtured into approved manliness by ingesting semen from older boys and young men. Eventually these young boys will also become semen donors to the next generation of young boys. By the age of 25, semen donors are supposed to become married and no longer need to donate their semen to the younger males in the tribe.

SLIDE 23

Or in the history of West and Central Asia, spreading into Afghanistan and Pakistan, the notion of the “beardless youth” as an erotic object of desire was common, and still continues to some extent to this day.

Simplistic interpretations in this complex diversity can lead to serious consequences.

SLIDE 24

Earlier this year, a report emerged from the backwaters of the North West Frontier of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, of a “marriage between a young sixteen year old boy and an older man in his forties. Such male-to-male marriages in Pashtun culture have been historically common and socially

tolerated. The *halekon*, meaning approximately “beautiful youth” or “beardless youth”, usually between the ages of twelve to sixteen, has a long history across the whole of the Middle-East and central Asia, where poetry celebrating the beauty of male youth was a sign of social tolerance.

International media picked up the story, and reported as the “first gay marriage in Pakistan”. As a direct outcome of this type of publicity brought down opprobrium and violence on the couple and their families, where both were arrested and imprisoned along with extremely negative reactions in Pakistan. Here the mixing of a globalising gay framework, definitions of childhood as innocent victim, along with shame and dishonour that such stories bring, become entangled to become a salacious story. Shock and horror.

While same-sex erotic and emotional desires exist bound within constructions of masculinity and gender performance, for many, sex with achievable sexual objects in the gender segregated societies of South Asia, is for personal release and immediacy. While for a significant number of males involved in same-sex behaviours, sex with another male is not seen as a permanent feature, even though it may be actually be so, but rather an additional, situational and opportunistic outlet. The constant expectation is that, one day, the person will be married and have children.

I have no answers. Our work with HIV prevention, support and care for males who have sex with males deals with the reality of people’s lives. An awful lot of male-to-male sex goes on in socio-cultural environments very different from that experience in London, New York, or Vancouver, in patterns also very different from what we may understand in the West as homosexuality, or gay, or even what we are speaking of here as intergenerational sex.

And a final note of caution. In South Asian cultures, adulthood is also defined very differently. As an unmarried male with no children, and therefore no adult obligations, I still have not achieved adulthood. I am still a boy. Unless I am perceived as sexless, a bramacharya, in which case I am a sanyasin, a religious person.