

Cultural constructions of male sexualities in India

June, 1995

“The human mind cannot think a thought unless the words to express the thought exist”

Eighty Four, George Orwell

Sexual identities arise within the context of the psycho-social and historical dynamics that are mediated by culture and language. Differing cultures will have different meanings. The terms heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual identities as they are understood, arise from Eurocentric perceptions, values and meanings.

The fluidity of the Indian male’s sexual experiences and behaviours, the social invisibility of sexual behaviours, gender segregation, Indian male homosociability and homoaffectionalism, male ownership of public space, shame cultures, community *izzat* and family honour, compulsory and arranged marriage, and within that compulsory procreative sex, joint and extended families, a personal sense of self subsumed into a family sense of self, male and female social roles as definers of gender and adulthood, delayed marriage, all have a central impact upon the constructions of sexual behaviours that are framed by differing contextual identities.

Since the 19th century the medicalisation of sexuality and sexual behaviour in Western cultures has created a whole new discourse to describe sexual behaviours and evolved new concepts of sexual identities. A person expressing same-sex behaviours became a homosexual. Procreative ‘heterosexuality’ became the normative process. The dichotomised, hierarchical and oppositional structures of what was deemed masculine and feminine framed these new concepts of ‘homosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuality’. At the same time the relationship between sexual behaviours arising from procreative acts and sexual behaviours arising from pleasure/lust also framed the debates around what was deemed ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ and ‘perverse’.

Here sexologists, both historic and contemporary, have played a key role in reducing the diversity of alternate sexualities, identities and behaviours into what for some was a pseudo-scientific discourse that invisibilises and demonises the rich cultural and social traditions of many differing sexual cultures. A form of sexual neo-colonialism has arisen whereby our countries have been invaded by this Western discourse and our own histories have been discounted.

The term homosexual does not have a direct equivalent in Indian community languages. This does not imply that same-sex behaviours do not exist. What it does mean is that these

behaviours have different histories, different contexts, different social constructions and are thus framed by different identities. In terms of men who have sex with men, what language exists either reflect actual sexual behaviours, terms that are often extremely abusive and degrading, or identities based upon concepts of "not men".

Here the act of sexual penetration is a definer of phallic power. The person penetrated is defined as "not man", while the penetrator remains undefined. The Hindi terms *gandu* and *khusra* reflect this. However in some discourse they are often used synonymously with the term homosexual, but they are not the same. They construct a person who is "not a man" and "not a woman", a third gender. The penetrator remains a man. Likewise, the term *hijra*, a socially constructed role for a group of men with religious and cultural significance, whose primary belief is around the religious sacrifice of their genitalia and who act as women in exaggerated styles, has also been used to describe boys/men who are sexually penetrated. However, *hijras* are not transvestites, transsexuals, or whatever Western label has been given them.

The sexual world view as expressed in contemporary India, has been formed by the central concepts of Vedic Brahmanism, Islam, Christianity and also of Ayurvedic and Western medicalisation of the body and sexuality. What we have is gender segregation of social space and labour, boy children as capital, male control of social spaces and economic resources. Gender roles are strictly defined, not only in terms of the physical body but also in terms of social duties and obligations. Transgressions of these roles can be severely punished through stigmatisation, social exclusion, exile, physical abuse and even death. Post-pubescent boys on the other hand are not men, not adults, a state defined by marriage. In that sense they are the "beardless youths" of so much Arab and Mughal literature, sexually available to men. Malehood and femalehood are contextualised by genitalia and social duty. Adulthood contextualised by marriage and children. A boy becomes an adult male, a man, upon marriage, a girl a woman by marriage and children.

This leads to a culture that demands compulsory marriage and procreation, that gives no validity and space to autonomous women and men, that stigmatises unmarried individuals, and only confers adulthood, social status and responsibility to married men and women who produce children.

The only way to deal then with issues around sexual behaviours is to invisibilise them. This is achieved by not having any public discussion about sex, sexual behaviours and sexualities. Since they are invisible they do not exist. While traditions expressive of sexual diversity are seen as dirty, deviant and perverted and men who participate as the penetrated are seen as

demasculinised, as partial women. Sexual behaviours cannot be brought into the public domain. To do so is to bring shame and dishonour to the family and/or community.

Sexual behaviour takes the place of sexuality. Women's sexual behaviour becomes controlled and marginalised, if not denied. Male sexual behaviour becomes self-absorbed, and is reduced to one of discharge rather than based upon a desire for the other person.

Because of this terrible silencing and denial of these histories from various ideologies, an almost total exile situation has emerged. In trying to resist this exile, a closeted and schizophrenic state of being has emerged where the person tries to assimilate into society through marriage and having children, yet expressing alternate sexual desires in *pardah*, in darkness, shame and in silence.

There is a construction around male sexual behaviours which can be defined by the Hindi word *maasti*. It means mischief, and is often used in the context of sexual play between young men and boys. More often than not this does not involve penetration. This *maasti* arises at moments of sexual tension, as Óbody tensionÓ, when sexual discharge becomes urgent, when sexual arousal arises during play or body contact, when opportunities are created for sexual contact, often under the blanket. Such opportunities are very frequent. Shared households in cramped conditions produce shared beds. There is social acceptance of males sharing beds, of male to male affectionalism, both public and private. This often means that a significant amount of sexual behaviour occurs in family environments, between uncles and nephews, cousins, friends, and even at times brothers. This is not seen as real sex. It is *maasti*. Sex is between a husband and wife!

Sexual behaviours in this construction are not an expression of a personal identity. Rather it is one of opportunity, accessibility, context, and an urgent desire for sexual discharge. What we have are behaviours but not identities. Sexualities instead of sexuality. Homosexualities instead of homosexuality.

Personal identity is contextualised within the joint and extended family. The family identity is more important than personal desire and choice. Individuality becomes lost and subsumed within the family. Privacy does not exist.

The form of social control of behaviour is constructed through concepts of honour and shame. This is very different from Western cultures of guilt.

Honour here is a possession, not a quality. Shame arises from honour being lost. Both of these elements are an expression of public visibility. At the same time, public behaviour is bound

within community and social acceptance, duty, obligation and honour. Not to fulfil these obligations, or to go against community values in a public way, is to bring shame, and hence dishonour, to family and community. It is the visibility of behaviour that is important, not the behaviour itself.

When an individual behaves in ways deemed to bring dishonour and shame to the family, extended family and/or community, the reaction can often be severe. Exile, excommunication, physical abuse, and sometimes death. Or there will be emotional or financial blackmail by family members to force conformity to family and community dictates.

Family honour is based upon the women of the household. The daughter's virginity is a prized family possession and to be policed, Her virginal status before marriage reflects upon family honour. This often means that sexually active men have very little sexual access to women, other than female prostitutes. Or perhaps obliging neighbourhood wives when their husbands are away! And even the domestic servant.

Marriage is the central issue. It is a compulsory duty, both family and community and is part of the definition of adult. It is a liaison between two families and to go against family decisions for whatever reason is to bring shame to the families. To remain unmarried also reflects upon the honour of the family.

Children and filial duty. Sex as a family obligation. 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'. The wife is seen as an Honoured Partner, as Mother and Sister. The husband as Lord. Marital sex as duty and as work.

Sex for pleasure is what occurs outside the marriage. And as long as this behaviour is invisible, it brings no shame and dishonour to the family. If women are not accessible then other men or boys will do. This is not desire but discharge. A cultural framework of compulsory procreative sexual intercourse.

Whilst marriage is compulsory and arranged, India is also filled with intense romance. In the ubiquitous Bollywood films the hero and heroine sing romantic and chaste love songs to each other. They will go through the trials and tribulations that the four hours demand, and if their families agree to the match, they can get married and sexual fulfilment will follow. But if such romance cuts across race, caste, sub-caste, religion, economic group, then the likelihood will be that it remains unfulfilled. The family always wins.

But the public domain is a male social space. For women to enter that social space can often lead the woman to be sexually harassed, to be defined as 'evening person', a prostitute.

Physical affection between men and women in public is not socially acceptable and often can be dangerous for both. For many men, because women are just not accessible, romantic longings are at a distance, unfulfilled, chaste, and often filled with a sexual urgency.

All this emotional and sexual energy, this romantic longing, the affectional needs and desires, have very few socially acceptable outlets. However, intense male friendships are formed within homoaffectionalist frameworks which include extensive touching, holding of hands, body contact, and the sharing of beds. And this is socially acceptable!

The line between homoaffectionalism in such a homosocial environment and actual homosexual behaviour is a narrow one, and many men cross this line in situations that enable the behaviour to maintain its invisibility. Thus often two boys/men sharing a bed under the same blanket may find it easier to sexually touch each other without consciously acknowledging the fact. This is *maasti*. A lot of this sex is between relatives; uncles and nephew, cousins, in-laws, where space and time afford it.

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, and perhaps they may be able to afford sex with a female prostitute. Here sex is discharge.

There is a small, but growing movement, amongst those whose sense of personal identities and emotional and sexual desires are outside the socially constructed 'normal' who are creating new forms of identities. Many of these may well call themselves lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and even heterosexuals. But in the main for so many men, sexual opportunity is what drives the urgent need for discharge.

Apart from the possibilities of sexual encounters with relatives and friends in the home and under the blankets, sexual encounters occur primarily in public spaces. There are no 'gay' bars, clubs, discos. The street, the bus stand, the park, the public toilet, the railway or bus station. Contacts are made, and quick sex available, penetrative or otherwise.

Workers in public and domestic arenas join in the sexual networks. Whether just for sexual release, money, or actual desire for sex with other men, is perhaps a difficult question to answer. Taxi-drivers, rickshaw wallahs, malish wallahs, room service boys and housekeeping men in hotels, waiters at restaurants, shop assistants. The framework is ubiquitous. The

glance, the second glance, the smile, the appropriate questions, sometimes for a few rupees more, sometimes just masti. In Indian urban cultures, male to male sex does not exist in a few selected areas as in Western cities. It is anywhere, in the right conditions, the right time, the right space.

In the middle and upper classes, domestic servants can also make sexual availability easier, based upon power as much as desire and discharge. Sex between the young male sons and the young (and sometimes not so young) male servants is not as rare as people think it is.

Such behaviours are not just an urban phenomena. Sex between males also occur in village environments. In the fields, in the dark. In the home under shared blankets.

What we can say then is that amongst Indian males, sexuality is not singularly constructed and contextualised within personal identities. Rather sexual behaviours based upon discharge and availability predominate. There are high levels of male to male sex because of the homosociability and homoaffectionalism of Indian society and the restricted sexual access to women. Perhaps what we can say is that Indian male sexualities are constructed within time and space!

Urban cultures and the growing middle class is beginning to develop social constructions of identities based upon specific sexual desires. These relate very much to economic and social spaces that enable access to privacy, access to Western literature and language, access to individuality.

Whether these emerging identities imitate Western constructions, only future history will tell.

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