

The *Kothis* (MSMs) in Society: An Anthropological Exploration

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ABSTRACT: Much of the world has been suffering from homophobia. This is probably due to the lack of clear understanding regarding the variegated nature of human sexual identity. The *Kothi*, the sexually receptive male in a male homosexual relationship, makes up a significant number and has a decided impact in the altered triad of gender roles. The present paper is, in itself, an attempt to unveil socio-demographic characteristics of the *Kothi*, in Chandigarh, study their sexuality and social networking and explore the factors that make them vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. In India unfortunately the MSM (men who have sex with men) – *Kothi*, community has come into significant focus mostly because of the HIV/AIDS dimension. The health providers have increased due to the huge amount of funding that is available to them, the MSM communities have used this to react and increase in number in the best traditions of ‘Parkinson’s Law of Social Work’ which states that social work increases to occupy all the social workers available in any given area. How this affects the MSM community itself and the society in general is another area the paper will delve into.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of identity and gender has taken on great significance in the global context of increasing awareness on one hand and realization of the lack of knowledge on the other. This is especially true in the context of human sexual identity, which requires close empirical delving into in order to pragmatically deal with major issues of health and disease. When talking about issues of sexual identity the question of sexual behaviour and the variations within becomes of prime focus and it is the issues of sexual behaviour that this paper delves into. The category of MSM (men who have sex with men) in sexual behaviour been

highlighted because of the growing significance of HIV/AIDS (Bartlett, 2006).

MSM is a broad umbrella term (meaning men who have sex with men) for varied behaviour categories, one of which is the *Kothi*. The *kothi*, a sexually receptive male in a male homosexual relationship, makes up a significant number and has a decided impact in the altered triad of gender roles. In order to understand this impact, the paper touches upon the issues of *kothi* identity, and weaves its way through their socio-economic, educational and vocational status. Through looking into the actual living pattern of the *kothis* in their families, delving into their everyday interactions, their interactions with other *kothis*, other MSM’s and *hijras* (transsexuals) and looking into their health practices, we have attempted to bring out a comprehensive picture of the *kothis* living in Chandigarh.

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METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on information collected from 35 individual cases of MSMs. The researchers used the case study technique to elicit information from men, 18 years of age or older who have sex with men, in several neighbourhoods of Chandigarh.

The study included an initial orientation to the study sites and initial contact, data collection through observation, informal interviews and case histories. Local men who have sex with men were involved in the research process. These men helped the researchers to map the areas of the city in which men who have sex with men congregate, and assist in contacting the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification

In the context of the MSM relationship the term *kothi* refers to males who define themselves by their feminine gender identities. They are effeminate men who may nevertheless be married. *kothi* are feminized males who play the part of the 'female' in their emotional, physical and social interactions with other males. *Kothis* prefer to be penetrated, some cross-dress, or use feminine make-up (Tasnim Azim *et al.*, 2008). "The feminine identity of the *kothi* is a reflection of both the effeminate demeanor of these men and the stereotypical feminine gender roles" (Rahiman *et al.*, pg). The term *kothi* is a product of the north Indian region.

The *kothi* identity is a complex construction with no equivalent in the West (Go *et al.*, 2004). For the male who is the recipient in the sexual relationship, the term *kothi* is of general acceptance in Chandigarh. Only the ones exposed to the outside world use the term 'gay'. The opposite role of masculine identified sexual partners is *giriya*, generally meaning male in the insertive role to the *kothi*. The commonly used term in the rest of India for *giriya* is *panthis* – masculine men who have sex (usually in the insertive role) with *kothis* (Go *et al.*, 2004).

The *kothis* have a male name, the name given to them by their families at birth. They also have a female name, generally the feminine of the male names or closely linked to the male names, often given to them

by their *giryas* by which the other *kothis* refer to them. Some do have very feminine 'filmy' names.

A model architectural experiment, Chandigarh was built in the 1950s as a new age urban hub. People migrated to Chandigarh in pursuance of a job either promised or offered to them. To better the life style was the main aim. The people with better jobs, well-to-do of the nearby rural areas and the government retirees of higher posts originally belonging to the Punjab and nearby areas, came and settled in the sectors, while the pockets of the original villages within Chandigarh swelled to become new settlements and slums. Only about 20 per cent of the *kothis* come from well to do families. Most others live in small quarters in the 'colonies' which is the colloquial for slums in Chandigarh. They grew up mostly in nuclear families consisting of parents and siblings. However, some of them grew up in patrilineal joint families, too. They have close interactions with the primary and secondary relations, visiting them and having them over on a fairly regular basis. They also made occasional visits to their parental villages. The families are patriarchal and the paternal relations are emphasized.

A few of the *kothis* have either come to Chandigarh or have been brought by some relative to earn a living and have then set up their own nuclear establishment. They, too, visit their parental homes often. About 70-80 per cent of the *kothis* interviewed were found to belong to the lower socio-economic background, with the average income being about Rs. 2500-5000 per month.

Living in the Family

Nearly 65.45 per cent of the *kothis* live in the family like a male, mainly taking up masculine roles. The families accept them as males and either ignore or condone the slight feminine characteristics like walking with a sway (*matak-ke*), interest in chatting with the female members and avoiding boys' games, interest in make-up and jewellery, cooking and serving guests. Almost 71.23 per cent opine that their families comprehend that they are different, as they are 'not blind or foolish' but they choose not to clearly state that they know. In the final analysis, it can be said that the families accept them as they are and choose to ignore the sexual propensity. Many-a-times they

are told to marry and do the right thing towards the family. Though many (84.43%) *kothis* are reluctant to marry and have told the family so, some feel that the options before them are few and if they have to live in the society they know they have to marry. 76.65 per cent of the *kothis* informants in this study, however, are within twenty-five years of ages, so it remains to be seen whether they opt for marriage in future or not. Even in cases where a *kothi* has a *giriya* who visits the house and stays over, they treat him like a friend of their son, ignoring or pretending that they do not know of them being 'lovers'. However, the problem arises if any of the *kothis* attempt to cross-dress in the family. They are chastised; reference to their 'wrong behaviour' is often made to intimidate them. If it still persists many are turned out of the family. Some of the *kothis* have taken up a separate residence away from the family in order to keep away from the pressures and follow their own sexual preferences. Most of the *kothis* prefer to be referred by their male names while in their locality. They carry out their sexual activities and sojourns in areas other than their own localities, as much at a distance as possible. At home, they as an adult become male (*kare mein rehna*) and ask their *kothis* friends to behave as males (*kare mein ana*) too. However, there are some nearly 25.34 per cent married *kothis* who behave normally as responsible family man; they behave in *kothis* style but in a different setup. At home they perform the expected roles of a father or a husband, keeping their *kothis* identity under covers from the family including wife.

Education and Vocation

About 40 per cent of the *kothis* had attended government schools but had continued studying only up to 8th standard. Many of them dropped out of schools as studying did not interest them. Thereafter, they just hung around with friends. Whenever opportunities opened up they acquired some experience facilitating their entry into paying jobs. About 20 per cent of them took college education while the rest, 40 per cent are illiterates.

In delving into the job experiences of the *kothis*, 5 per cent of them learned electrical works, 25 per cent took to beautician and body decoration training, 70 per cent have learnt free-style dancing, performing

on stage with orchestra groups on various family and locality celebrations, and also training others in dancing. This also includes acting in local street drama companies which put up performances on stage on the occasions such as *Ram Lila* or *Navratri*. Many *kothis* engaged in daily wage earning jobs. Presently a number of them have taken up jobs as peer educators with NGO's working on HIV/AIDS projects.

The *kothis*, however, always substantiate their income whenever they are low on funds through paid sex. They move around in area like the Interstate Bus Stand, and other visible spots like the locality parks, tea shops, etc. generally in the evenings. These strolls, known as *geri*, serve to make them visible to the *giryas*, who thereafter approach them or are approached; the charges and the spot are then quickly settled for sexual activity (*dhor dhappa*). The areas like the forest, the open scrub forest, the dirt dumps and areas less frequented by people are their favourite spots. One such spot is close to Pir Nigaheh, near Una in, Himachal Pradesh, where prayers are offered on every Thursday at the Dargah. At this spot, many *giryas* visit and the *kothis* go there to take up their offer for paid sex. Most of the activities take place in the forest areas around the spot.

Self Identity

The general contention is that the *kothis* profess to the feminine gender identity. However, through our field work, we find three types of variations in the connotation of the term, *kothi*. The first one is where the person is effeminate and is consciously so, though at times keeps this side hidden. This type generally are the younger unmarried ones. Many in this type do not feel good about possessing male genitals and profess to feel the sexual desires in the anal region; even sexual release, they feel, is at that region. Many use coquetry, and other feminine wiles. Many, though not exactly cross-dressing, use more of the traditional feminine markers like polishing nails, wearing long hair, shaping eyebrows, wearing rings, bracelets and body paint (*mehendi*). In keeping with the fact that they are operating in a relatively traditional world, these are seen as covert means of retaining the need to establish femininity by the *kothis*. Within this type, too, we find that the ones who publicly cross-dress are looked down upon by the others. This type of *kothi*

invariably find a forum where they can dress and function like a female. Again, within this type one finds a variety, known as *khanjra kothi*, i.e. the *kothi* who makes paid sex his primary occupation.

The second type of *kothi* is the one who is identified as such because of his sexual identity and propensity, the behavioral aspect of femininity is absent. Most of this type of *kothi*, we find, were forced into anal receptive sex and his clients persist on seeing him in this role. Thus, the circumstances of coercion, exposure to only this form of sex and the option of sex with females becoming closed for him. He is left with little option but to become a *kothi*.

The third type of *kothi* is the one who is married and have children, have sex with his wife and also executed the responsibilities of a family man within the family of procreation, yet professing a preference for anal receptive sex away from the family. They have a dual identity. They are termed as *do-paratha*. However, they identify themselves as a *kothi*. the *kothi* identity is kept hidden at home, the wife do not have knowledge of this aspect of her husband's identity. In the *kothi* circle, he is accepted as a fellow member because he converses and behaves like them.

Sexual Behaviour

Most *kothis* have had their first sexual encounter with a male at about the age of 8 to 10. The receptive sexual encounter generally occurred with a family member, someone who is in close proximity with the child. After the first encounter, the sexual journey carries on for about three to four years with the same person and then the need for this type of sex gets stabilized and the person looks for only this type of sex.

Kothis claim that they need sex much more than other people and one sexual encounter does not satisfy them. They feel at least four sexual encounters are required to give them a feeling of satisfaction. They purport to feel a sense of craving and some secretions in the anal region whenever they want sex. Nearly all claim that till approximately the age of twenty-five, they follow this standard on an everyday basis. Gradually, as they age, they do not solicit sex that often, but when they do they would like to have it many times. Even if they have a permanent *giriya* they do go on their rounds at times and look for other

partners to have sex with. They are flirtatious towards men, even if the men are not inclined towards homosexuality.

Inter and Intra-Group Interactions

Besides the feminine behaviour, a characteristic feature among the *kothis* is the use of expressed sexual gestures. Talking about other *kothis* they make reference to 'that one who is always ready to take on anyone on his back' or 'he is always humping'. And while saying this they use hand gestures. Among the *kothis* there is a cautious camaraderie when they meet, talking about their own *giryas*, the *giryas* they like, the number of times they have had sex, etc. Most of the conversation is oriented around sex and their preference of *giryas*, all this in a playful 'girlish' way. They even sit around and tease the men they see around. They are also wary of other *kothis* saying that so-and-so steals *giryas* and thus claim that, 'I wouldn't like to move around with him'. They mostly refer to other *kothis* in the feminine. *kothis* have a language of their own which they use in their own circles, this they call *pharsi*. Some *kothis* who have received some exposure to the outside world use English phrases at regular intervals and refer to themselves as 'gay' while talking to us.

A *kothi* and a *giriya* can recognized each other very quickly even if there are no apparently overt signs on the self, just a smile, a nod or a gesture is enough. This is described in Niang's work as, "when two *ibbi* meet in a car or a bus, they easily recognize each other right from the start. The clothes they wear can be an external sign of belonging to the *ibbi* family. Some *ibbi* may wear women's clothes but that is not the case for most *ibbi*. Their way of dressing is not enough to identify the *ibbi*..... But from the moment he wants to communicate with another *ibbi* with him in the mosque, he was a way of moving the sleeve of his boubou, of undulating his hips, of rolling his eyes that identifies him exclusively to one who belongs to his community of sexual preference," (Niang *et al.*, 2003: 506).

When a *kothi* and a *giriya* become more permanent, that is, staying together, they behave like a husband and a wife towards each other. The *kothis* behave somewhat coquettishly towards their own *giryas*, many-a-times even goading them with

reference to other men. The permanent *giryas* are very possessive towards their *kothis*, who on the other hand behave very casually towards them. They are also not too worried about the other minor forays of their *giryas*, but if the relationship breaks off they do suffer intensely. The casual behaviour of the *kothi* derives from the confidence that no other *kothi* would approach him. There is a tacit understanding among them that once a man becomes someone's permanent *giriya* he is out of bounds for all other *kothis*. On the other hand, once a *giriya*, a man would always want insertive sex with a *kothi*. When a *kothi* considers himself as unattached he uses many wives to attract *giryas*. Of course, the walk, the *geras*, are ways to attract the *giryas*, who, in turn, can make out who a *kothi* is. The 'double deckers', behave appropriately either as a *giriya* or a *kothi* as the situation demands. However, many *kothis* are not comfortable with them, finding them false and, by implication, dirty.

Interaction with the Hijra (Transgender)

Another behavioural identity category which is of relevance while understanding the *kothis* is the concept of *hijra* (transgender). "*Hijras* refer to transgender persons who belong to the *hijra* cult. However, not all transgendered persons identify as *hijras*. Until a few years, *hijras* were the only visible section of society who had an alternate sexual (and social) identity. *Hijras* belong to a distinct socio-religious and cultural cult, now recognized as the 'third gender' (apart from male and female) by the government of India. They dress in feminine attire (cross dress) and are organized under seven main *gharanas* (clans). Depending upon their emasculation status, biological males who join the *hijra* community may be known as *ackwas* (before emasculation – with intact male genitalia) or *nirvans* (after emasculation)" (Joseph, 2006).

Kothis, by and large, feel that there are very few true *hijra* who, they say, are people born with no external genitalia, *Hijra*, nowadays, according to them are but *kothis* who had been emasculated through an operation. The *hijra*, they feel, are not fond of the *kothis*, as they are sexually active and the *hijra* pretend not to be so. "*Hijras* implicitly or explicitly define themselves in opposition to the overly licentious (in their constructions) and much disparaged *kada-chatla*

kothis ('men' who would be included within the MSM category) or *gandus*, as they are more commonly and pejoratively refer to these individuals. According to *hijras*, *gandus* are men who enjoy anal sex, are defined not only by the form of their sexual desire, but more importantly, by its excess" (Reddy, 2005: 260). In fact, one of the reasons the *kothis* avoid overt cross-dressing is because, they say, the *hijra* take it as an offence and state that they try to usurp their place in the society. *Kothis*, many-a-times, go about pretending to be *hijra* and ask for money in return for a blessing on auspicious occasions like marriages and child birth. They are careful in choosing areas which do not fall under the demarcated areas of the resident *hijra*. Each *hijra* group has its own demarcated territory and an uneasy truce exists between the *kothis* and the *hijra* of that territory. When referring to the *kothis* of their territory, the *hijra* refers *kothis* as their *chelas* (disciple) and themselves as the *guru* (teacher).

The Issue of HIV/AIDS and Kothis

Interviews with the *kothis* show that *kothis* confess to a higher sexual drive. They are highly prone to casual sexual encounters. There is a feeling among many of them that it is only through sex with the opposite sex where the vaginal and seminal effusions intermix and there is a chance of spread of HIV and thus anal sex is benign. Again, since they have a high sex drive, they are not too choosy even if they do know of the modes of transmission of HIV/AIDS through anal sex. Another factor contributing towards high risk sexual practices are the circumstances created among the MSMs due to the use of alcohol, drugs and 'blue' films, building up a 'high', thereby making rational thinking a problem. The fourth problem is the use of force, especially towards a *kothi*. In north India, "sex with another male is not seen as a permanent feature, rather as an additional, situational and opportunistic outlet" (Khan, 2006). Besides, there is a stigma associated with homosexual making the encounters furtive, laying down opportunity for force and therefore no protective measures used.

Again, the lack of knowledge, awareness and attitude of casualness towards sex and the marginalization of MSM relationships result in higher numbers of sexual partners and lower self-esteem,

leading to unsafe behaviours. Finally, the absence of a vocal, self-identifying MSM population prevents the application of bio-medical models of HIV prevention and behaviour change.

The situation has changed to some extent in the last five years due to two circumstances, one, the death of (two?) HIV positive *kothis*, who were known to most of them; the second, being the amendments to the article 370 making them feel less threatened. The *kothis* have become more receptive to the idea of using condoms, but their subservient position as an individual in this society, as has been discussed above, manifests itself while taking the decision regarding use of condoms.

CONCLUSION

In today's world, the question of identity is a focal issue as many other important issues arise from it. One such vital issue, which has shaken the world, is the rise of incidences HIV/AIDS. As sexual encounters are one of the most important modes of transmission of this virus, the sexual behaviour patterns have taken on added meaning. In order to hone in on an identity, the behaviour which gives rise of such an identity becomes important. The term "MSM" has thus been adopted in an attempt to focus on behaviour and to include all men who have sex with men, regardless of how they see themselves. It encompasses males who define themselves either by their sexual behaviour (eg. gay) or by their feminine gender identities (*kothis*, *waria*, *katoey*) in addition to their masculine identified sexual partners (Khan, 2006: 2).

To conclude we may state that by providing a picture of a lifestyle of a behavioural group among the MSM, especially the *kothis*, we hope to recreate the subculture within which they live and the relation of this subculture with the rest of society. A look into this aspect can help in understanding the underlying sexuality and the sexual behaviour of some of the MSMs. This in turn can give us an insight into how the matter can be dealt with in a much more humanitarian way and also to encourage such men to enter back into the society with respect. However, to complete this process a thorough public awareness of the general public also needs to be undertaken. Only then can a better and safer sexual practice among the *kothis* and the MSMs be achieved.

By focusing on the MSMs for the reasons due to AIDS, and by thinking of them as a problem, by marginalizing them through the politics of disease control, these categories have grown, burgeoned, gone underground and created subcultures. Through understanding them and their subculture, an understanding on human sexuality is achieved. How we may tackle these issues more sensitively than they have been tackled, is a pointer to this effect.

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