



Negotiating Sexual 'Otherness': An Exploratory Study of Harassment on Male Homosexuals in Metropolitan Kolkata, India

Ganguli Dibyendu

Dept. of Sociology, Jogamaya Devi College, Kolkata and Visiting Fellow, Dept. of Law, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, INDIA

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Abstract

This empirical study explores the harassment and the negotiation of spaces of male homosexuals and to what extent harassment and negotiation affect on their lives within the context of life situations, aspirations and achievements. This research situates sexual "Otherness" as pivotal in understanding the harassment of male homosexuals. Data derive from an exploratory study among self-identified homosexual men. Result shows that male homosexuals are facing harassments from various agents of society. The homo-hetero dichotomy to the realm of sexuality makes a marginal space for male homosexuals. The repression from heteronormative society increases their mobility and makes them conscious politically. As a result, they make solidarity unit among themselves to protect their rights and privileges. However, this study suggests about the importance of structural change concerning the sexuality issues.

Keywords: Homosexuality, otherness, harassment, cruising spot, negotiation of spaces.

Introduction

Simplistic recognition of conventional human diversity, combined with ethnocentric thinking can lead to a tendency to depict 'Others'. In that "difference" lays the potential for hierarchical or stereotypical thinking, i.e. all natives are the same or all homosexuals are 'feminine' and 'abnormal'. It can be understood within the binary of self/other and can be seen as organizing the very existence of individual subjects. Many contemporary theories of identity use the "Other" as half of a Self/Other dichotomy distinguishing one person from another. In his groundbreaking 1993 book, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Bauman writes that the notion of "Otherness" is central to the way in which societies establish identity categories¹. In our heterosexist society, homosexuality is the 'other' of heterosexuality. Sexual differences are a result of social exclusion and internalization of sexual 'Otherness'. As a result, homosexuals are facing harassments from various agents of society. This empirical study explores the harassment and the negotiation of spaces of male homosexuals and to what extent their harassment and negotiation affect on their lives within the context of life situations, aspirations and achievements. I have also examined especially how their life situations are different from mainstream society and how sexual "Otherness" creates a coercive relationship with heterosexuals.

Methodology

The objectives of the research work were achieved by employing multi-method technique of social research. Hence, a number of other techniques were employed to collect and analyses of the data, namely, observation and narrative analysis of verbal and non-verbal attitudes, in-depth interviews of male

homosexuals. In order to the study and analysis of various documents, theoretical analyses and literary works were gathered from various libraries, resource centres, internet and other relevant sources. This study is based on participatory approach. A long time was devoted to build rapport with the respondents. In order to the study, 50 respondents were selected through snowball sampling for the study. This was an exploratory study. I had used an interview schedule to get access to the data. I tried to gather maximum information through the face to face interview. But, sometimes, it was really difficult to gather actual information during the interviews with the people who have been living under the social stigma and facing the adverse effects of social exclusion. I tried to build up inter-personal relationship to access the sexual lives and experiences of those people. This study deals with a hidden side of the society and some people of this study are vulnerable, stigmatized and facing discrimination. For this reason, I had followed the ethical guidelines of National AIDS Control Organisation and Supreme Court of India's judgment to study with stigmatized and vulnerable population where they suggested not disclosing the actual identity information of the respondents^{2,3}. So confidentiality was maintained strictly throughout the research.

Limitations: The scope of the study was limited to finding out specific aspects of sexualities. Due to the stringency of resources, e.g. relevant literature, information, etc., it was not possible to cover all aspects. Usually, this kind of study takes a long time. Respondents of this study are busy as well as shy to disclose their sexuality. However, another major limitation of the study is that not everyone agrees to a single definition of homosexuality; hence this study was restricted to individuals who identify themselves as "homosexual".

Theoretical Perspective: “Othering” is a way of defining and securing one’s own positive identity through the stigmatization of an “other”. The study of “other culture” is an area which came from the Orientalists to begin with and finally put into practice by the first generation anthropologists and colonial rule. Edward W. Said’s seminal book, entitled *Orientalism* (1978), has been part of a vigorous debate among social scientists concerning their perceptions and methods of studying other cultures⁴. Europeans viewed that the populations of the Third World as weak and vicious, and in need of being ‘civilized’ which is called ‘Eurocentrism’. This concept emphasized that European culture and values are appropriate and civilized than the ‘Other’ culture. From 19th century onward the concept of ‘Otherness’ has gained importance slowly in academic realm⁵.

Social exclusion and inequality both are very much interrelated with the concept of “Other”. These are usually discussed as outcomes of power relations. At a process level this becomes personal when inequality is linked to an active process of discrimination, stereotyping and intolerance. At this process level, social exclusion is easily visualized as social closure. The in-group consolidates and defines its identity as superior to other groups. ‘Power structures’ perpetuate inequality and work to continually undermine the empowerment attempts of disadvantaged groups⁶. Foucault’s ethical thought can also suggest a contextual examination of the political agenda implied in the study of sexuality⁷. Spivak is one of the pioneering scholars of subaltern studies. In her famous article “Can the Subaltern Speak”, she argues that “the subaltern cannot speak”⁸. Her highly controversial article covered a wide ranging critical debate on recovering subaltern agency and the “voice” in history. She has also been credited for problematizing our ability to reclaim subaltern voices from their origins. Baudrillard has attempted to rediscover a voice and agency for the subaltern. He found that subalterns are doomed to be failure because they can not be represented, highlights their demands of our present political culture. This culture compels to critics to make the ‘others’ voice heard⁹. The same is true for homosexuals in India. Almost the every facet of social lives they are neglected or negatively depicted. Due to legislative constraints they have no human rights in the social and political spheres and they can not speak. In a broad spectrum, subaltern culture of “queer” people like homosexuals has lower acceptance and most of the time their preference nourished under the blanket¹⁰.

According to postmodern tradition, queer studies shot into prominence in sociological and cultural studies. Queer study is a set of ideas based around the idea that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are. Queer identities are characterized by the standing identities against the conventional heterosexual outlook. Here sexual preference is not defined in opposition to heterosexuality, which would place it within a heterosexual-homosexual binary; rather the ‘queer’ disrupts the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy by being ambiguously

situated outside of such framework¹¹. This theory is “advanced” and “up-to-date” theory. Queer theory advocates changes in the relationship between gay and lesbian liberationist struggle and the dominant culture of society that the other contemporary kinds of “gay and lesbian theory” do not advocate¹². Seidman argues that queer studies maintain that homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy is not a biological or cultural necessity but the product of a hegemonic ideology that constrains and compels individual desire¹³. However, it is evident that queer theory is very much important to analyse the social situation of homosexuals. This theoretical paradigm talks about the contemporary views of the society and the repression of ‘queer’ people by the dominant group.

Findings: Sexual differences are produced and reproduction. They are more or less connected to social inequalities and exclusion. The expression of homo/hetero differences in all sorts of areas demanded the public recognition. An assertion of sexual difference may correspond to the concern of dominant groups, or those who belong to the sexual majority in the host society. Sexual differences not only create difficulties and tension between two groups, this also create social injustice where minority group fold themselves and majority group show their expression of power. However, in a social environment of increased tolerance homosexuals are negotiating their own space with our heterosexist society. Yet this increasingly pluralistic social environment constitutes a situation within which homosexuals’ approaches to intimate relationships, far from being simply subject to the pursuit of highly individual pleasures, demand the negotiation about socially, ethically and sexually complex hazards.

Asymmetrical power relations and harassment: The main problem of the homosexuals with heterosexuals is the conflicting value system. Some sociologists and behaviorists want to project homosexuality as a purely normative behavior. To them, it is practiced widely in our society. Multiple partner sex is not an acceptable behavior for most of the heterosexuals. This is, indeed, pervasive in character, but for homosexuals, it is normative. This kind of conflicting value system creates many problems for homosexuals.

Homosexuals faced more problems than the heterosexuals because of their sexuality. Even heterosexual colleagues are reluctant to protect them and, sometimes, harassed or blackmailed. The unequal power relation between homosexuals and heterosexuals is the main reason for this kind of problems. They are treated as the ‘Other’ in the power structure where heterosexuals are the dominant group and homosexuals the subdued one. For instance, Nabin (name changed), a homosexual, tells that

“I was repeatedly abused physically by my manager at the work place. But I did not report it to anybody because of the fear of exclusion from other colleagues. After all, I also want to stand in my career like others.”

Situation may vary from person to person. Many respondents have faced harassment and mental pressure while some of them get support from their colleagues. Homosexuals are prone to face discrimination and harassment from their colleagues and other agents of the society. But those who do not face such problems are lucky. But others are not. For example, Soumya (name changed), a homosexual and a group theatre artist, shares his experience:

“one of my colleagues knows that I am a gay. I told this to him only. He is so nice that he gives me the advice without the any objection. He told me that I am a good human being and he does not mind my homosexual identity. And many of my colleagues said that they feel good with me as I can guide them. They also told me that I have the positive and creative thinking, and have good human relation. My colleagues like me as I guide them.”

Sometimes, it depends on the social position and the interpersonal relationship with the other members of different sexual orientation. Harassment can create physical or health problems as well as mental problems like trauma, disorder, etc. Male homosexuals face physical and/or psychological harassment from a number of sources, e.g. their family, kinsmen, neighbors and colleagues. The asymmetry in power relationship is the central to the construction of “Otherness”. Only the dominant group (i.e. heterosexuals) is in a position to impose the value of its identity and devalue the identity of the “Others” (i.e. homosexuals) though imposing discriminatory measures. Therefore, if the ‘Other’ of heterosexual is homosexual and if the ‘Other’ of masculine is feminine, then the opposite is not true in a heterosexist society. Here, homosexuals are ‘Others’ precisely because they are subject to the other category and they are unable to prescribe their own norms. For this reason, harassment is everyday reality and pain for many homosexuals. Physical and/or psychological harassment at occupational place is also common for many homosexuals who are effeminate in nature. It can be observed that those male homosexuals who are feminine in nature are harassed more than the male homosexuals who are masculine in nature. In our society, gender roles are traditionally divided into strictly feminine and masculine roles. However, gender role norms for women and men can vary significantly from one country or culture to another, or even within a country or culture. According to the conventional gender norms, men are socialized into believing certain characteristics which are definitive in determining their manliness and masculinity. These characteristics range from not crying when they get hurt to being and playing violently. The socialization of masculinity in our society begins as early as the first stages of infancy¹⁴. On the other hand, femininity comprises the physical and mental attributes associated with the female sex and is purely culturally determined. An effeminate male subconsciously behaves like female which has traditionally been viewed more negatively. The masculinity is only viewed in contrast to female oppression only. In the case of male homosexuals, a range of masculinity exists among them. But they are not considered as ‘real man’ because of their

alternative sexuality. Heterosexuals have ‘real masculinity’ and they are ‘real man’ in contrast to homosexuals because they are practicing mainstream sexuality which is based on domination over females. In reality, it is found that they are dominating over the homosexual males also. So domination of masculinity over ‘real masculinity’ persists. Male homosexuals are harassed by heterosexual family members, kinsmen, neighbors, colleagues, friends and peer groups. It is observed that even the police are reluctant to protect them because the lack of sensitization and social consciousness. Further, there is no clear rights based law for them. The role of hegemonic sexuality is clearly serving the interests of the state rather than the sexually marginalized group. From the school level many of them who have effeminate behavior face harassment. At that time, they have no clear conception about homosexuality or same-sex preference. Even they could not understand why friends and peer group members behaved roughly and called them as ‘Ladies’, ‘Mashi’ (Aunty), ‘Boudi’ (Brother’s wife), etc. But levels of harassment are not same for all because of different backgrounds. Handfuls of male homosexuals are lucky because their heterosexual family members, kinsmen and neighbors accept their alternative sexual preference. But others are not so lucky. Some are lucky because their colleagues and heterosexual friends are very supportive, but some are not. Ayon (name changed), a homosexual and a choreographer, shares his bitter experience and says:

“I changed my old troop due to the harassment of my colleagues at the work place. They always teased by calling me ‘aunty’, ‘male hooker’, etc. This was the reason, I lost my concentration and it was not possible for me to work over there any more.”

In work place there were two other respondents who changed their jobs due to the harassment by their colleagues. It is found that misconception and homonegativity plays vital role to ostracize homosexuals. It is also found that heterosexuals harassed homosexuals as they are sexually “Other” or not similar to them.

It is found that most of the respondents have overcome problems like harassment. But still they had awful experience. The rest of them are still suffering and they do not know how to overcome those problems. Most of the times, homosexuals can not express anything to anybody except their friends of own sexuality. The contemporary social status of homosexuals makes them marginalized. Balu (name changed), a homosexual, says that

“one of my friend committed suicide due to harassment by his colleagues. I am still suffering from the problem and I don’t know what I do. Sometimes, I think about committing suicide.”

Harassments in the workplace are common. Homosexual respondents with feminine demeanor face more harassments and verbal abuse than those with masculine demeanor. It is very fewer than number of homosexuals because the social norms are dominated and created by heterosexuals which are

heteronormative as well as homonegative. Masculine sexuality involves the oppression of women, competition among men, and homophobia (fear of homosexuality). It is linked with structural patriarchy which is the systematic domination through unequal opportunities, rewards, punishments, and the internalization of unequal expectations through sex role differentiation. So harassments, verbal and non-verbal abuses are common and painful reality for male homosexuals.

Consequence of harassment: Mental or psycho-traumatic difficulties: Sexual repression is associated with both being a victim and being a perpetrator of physical violence. Psychological effects have also been noticed. Rubin define that mental problems are psychological or behavioral pattern, associated with subjective distress or disability that occurs in an individual and which is not a part of normal development of culture¹⁵. Torrey and Miller found that such a disorder may consist of a combination of affective, behavioral, cognitive and perceptual components¹⁶. Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder, Chemical Dependency, Dementia - Alzheimer's, Depression, Eating Disorders, Personality Disorders, Schizophrenia, Trauma, etc. are the various types of mental troubles. Regular psychological stress, e.g. work life distress, relationships, legal issues, is caused various mental problems. Many respondents are also part of this kind of mental problems. A significant number of homosexual respondents have already attended or are still seeking the help of psychologists or psychiatrists to overcome their mental disorders. Harassment of homosexuals is due to their alternative sexuality. It is true that all problems create some sort of short term or long term mental disorders. Generally, the whole careers of the respondents are associated with public image which they try to maintain. Problems related with their sexuality can adversely affect their public image, and this can spoil their careers. Incidents related with their sexual lives can disturb their mental set-ups. So they always have a mental pressure to uphold their public image.

Many respondents face a lot of mental pressure which later evolve as a problem. It comes either from their side, e.g. sexual health related problems or from the society, e.g. verbal or non-verbal abuse by the heterosexual people. Sometimes, they commit suicide due to the harassment. It is found from the study that four homosexual respondents attempted to commit suicide due to mental depression. It is also found that suicide takes place in case of break-up of homosexual romance and psychological disorder. It is found that more or less all homosexual respondents still face mental pressure due to their sexuality. Physical attacks, sexual abuse, emotional and social alienation, psychological trauma become the everyday lived reality of many homosexual respondents. Most of the problems come from the heterosexuals. For this reason, many homosexuals have negative attitudes towards heterosexual people. Prakash (name changed), a homosexual, says that "most of the heterosexuals do not consider homosexuals as a human being. They always try to humiliate us."

Many homosexual respondents attempted suicide due to the humiliation by some heterosexist people. But they are fortunate that they did not succeed to do this. But all are not so lucky. Anuj (name changed), a homosexual, argues:

"if we visit various social networking sites for gays then we can find a number of gay suicide reports there. Most of the suicides by the homosexuals due to their sexuality can not be considered homosexual suicide in the present heteronormative legal system."

The main reason for harassment of male homosexuals is the disclosure of their sexual affections to the public, e.g. sexual affairs with other males within the working place, can be scandalized by some social agents or media. Rajat (name changed), a homosexual, shares his experience and tells:

"after scandalized my affair with one of my senior male colleague by a print media, I was deeply concerned about my future and fell in mental depression and eating disorder. A well known psychologist in Kolkata gave me her healing touch through regular counselling and now I am mentally fit and fine."

One can not deny mental and psychological pressures which can later evolve as a mental disorder. Many social and health problems lead to the mental problems which is true for male homosexuals. It is found that harassments and mental problems are more or less faced by all the respondents in this study. But nature, cause, type and intensity vary from respondents to respondents because of their various backgrounds. In this study it is found that high levels of legal, semi-legal, and extra-judicial violence against male homosexuals result from the explosive combination of authoritarian legacies, powerfully unaccountable police forces, and deep levels of societal homophobia.

Cruising spot as an agent to develop solidarity among male homosexuals: Cruising spot is a place for gossiping. Male homosexuals come with their like minded friends and enjoy for few hours of a day. A number of homosexual people are frequently come over there. Most of them come to cruising spot to collect phone numbers and to have fun. All homosexuals come to cruising spot for mental relaxation. Often they come to cruising spot because their homosexual friends and mates visit the same spot frequently. Homosexuality is thus interlinked with many factors such as social, cultural, political, etc. Among them, the cultural factor is very important because their move to cruising spot is in the search of satisfying cultural needs including mental relaxation. Cruising spots have cultivated a new value system which is different from heteronormative values. All the members are totally acquainted with the new value system of the cruising spot except some new comers. Most of their values are juxtaposed from heterosexual values, e.g. heterosexuality emphasised on monogamy, but homosexuals do polygamy, heterosexuals prefer their partners from opposite sex, but homosexuals prefer partners from same-sex category. Homosexuals are very much conscious about their

oppression and harassment by heterosexist society. For this reason, they frequently encounter heterosexist culture which develops an ethnic feeling. Kolkata has a number of cruising spots, namely, Rabindra Sarovar, Central Park, Subash Sarovar, Chittaranjan Park, etc. They visit cruising spots very frequently. Most of them visit the cruising spot in the weekend because of less work pressure. Many respondents who have busy work schedule hardly manage to visit cruising spots. But they try to visit at least once a month. In fact, cruising spots are the interaction point and the point to breed "we-feeling" among homosexuals. Here homosexuals develop an antagonistic feeling for heterosexuals. Cruising spot is one of the catalysts to develop sexual ethnocentrism and it is a place for socialization of homosexuals according to their group psyche. The lack of knowledge and sensitization of heterosexuals about homosexuality is the main reason for their harassment. It is found that many heterosexuals have negative feeling about cruising spot without any proper knowledge of the place. This lack of acceptance of sexual diversity has a strong tendency to lead to negative stereotypes toward 'other' cultural/ethnic groups and negative prejudice and negative behaviors against homosexuals.

Role of support networks to negotiate "Otherness": From this study, it is found that the problems of adjustment with heterosexist society, psychological inequality with contemporary dominant values, etc. are some of the factors which move them to form the organization of their own. These organizations help them to grow ethnic consciousness. Male homosexuals have formed various organizations in Kolkata. They celebrate Holi, Diwali and other religious activities and of course, parties in different occasions such as New Year party, Mahalaya party, etc. They also celebrate "Rainbow Pride Walk". For such community activities, some sort of formal organization is required. It is natural for a "sexually marginalized group" to form community based organization (CBO) to recognize and organize such activities. In Kolkata and adjoining areas, three CBOs are dominant, viz. Swikriti Society, People Like US and Amitié Trust. These organizations also act as a political body in the sexual rights based movement. However, CBOs have a major role to socialize homosexuals as per their community psyche and protect them from harassment. They also include those people who support their sexuality. These organizations are generating consciousness about homosexuality among the common mass and parents of homosexuals through the advocacy. They are also fighting for effeminate males at schools where they occasionally face harassment by their peer groups and teachers.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to look at diverse groups of homosexuals in order to offer a perspective on sexual cultures, self-representations and behaviors. The diversity within their own sexuality is organized around social class (which itself determines modes of sexual initiation, potential sexual

identities, lifestyles, support networks and social circuits); sexual identity (including marked identities such as 'gay', or as well as default male identity); and gender self-presentation (e.g. more normatively masculine vs. more normatively feminine), etc. The masculinity of heterosexuals is problematic. On the one hand, they stigmatized homosexuals as effeminate. On the other hand, they show off their masculinity in terms of using slangs, pressurising and harassing their homosexual colleagues and acquaintances. These have made homosexuals as non-expressive and introvert to disclose their sexuality to 'others'. This has, even, compelled many homosexuals to become psychologically depressed. The lack of knowledge to accept cultural diversity and intolerance for out group is the main reason behind harassment. In fact, we need to be able to move analytically between ideas about sexual preferences, the seemingly individual experience, and the ways in which such subjective processes are shaped by the societal conditions in which they take place. Safe spaces are required for homosexuals to go and speak to counsellors, take refuge from violence and get legal aid. A strong social acceptance and socio-legal support can strengthen their social position. However, further research is needed to explore more dimensions of harassment of male homosexuals in metropolitan Kolkata.

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