Homosexuality in India: Past and Present

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Homosexuality in India: Past and Present

By Ruth Vineace

In 1990 the magazine Bombay Doll (Bombay Friends) appeared in Bombay. In 1991, AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (Anti-AIDS Discrimination Campaign), known as ARVA, published its pioneering report Laminate: Heart of Gay. In the 1990s many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) organizations emerged in urban areas. Several of them publish newsletters; many now receive foreign funding, especially those that do HIV/prevention work. Sakhiyani, Giti Thadani’s short book on lesbian love in India, appeared in 1996, but is flawed by its erasure of medieval, especially Muslim materials. The problem with the assertion that homosexuality is a formation import- ed from modern Europe or medieval West Asia, and that it was non-existent in ancient India, is that it was a subject per- haps reflects the general conservative natures of the people’. Salerno Kidwai and I had been sepa- rately collecting material on same-sex love in various decades, and in 2000 we published Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History, a collection of extracts translated from a wide range of texts in fifteen Indian languages and written over a period of more than two millennia. We found that same-sex love and romantic friendship have flour- ished in India in various forms, without any extended history of overt per- secution. These forms include inviolated partnerships, highly visi- ble romances, and institutionalized rit- uals such as exchanging vows to create lifelong fictive kinship that is honoured by both partners’ families.

We demonstrate the existence in pre- colonial India of complex discourses around same-sex love and also the use, power, and meaning of many of these terms and codes to distinguish homo- erotic love and those inclined to it. This confirms Swet’s and Zwickel’s work on ancient Indian male love. By positioning the recent findings from Western antiquity, and Boswell’s earlier argument that same-sex desire as a category was not the invention of nineteenth-century European eroticists, as Foucault claims it was. We also found evidence of same-sex partnerships flourish- ing in some medieval Indian cities. Like the erotic temple sculptures at Khaju- raho and Konark, ancient and medieval temples and sculptures show that the whole range of sexual behaviour was known in pre-colonial India. British nineteenth-century adminis- trators who were organizing a fundraising party generally anti-s and specifically homophobic attitudes into India. Under colonial rule, what used to be a

Birthday in Beijing
Women Tongzhi Organizing in 1990s’ China

Up to the early 1990s, the word ‘homosexual’ (male or female) did not exist in the Chinese laws or media. In the medical literature and in dictionaries, homosexuality was explained as a mental illness or as a sexual perversity. Before the 1990s, many homosexuals, especially lesbians, did not know that there were other people with the same orientation; they were the only one to one same-sex partners. Many homosexuals got married (heterosexually), while hiding their same-sex partners from their families. Because of the almost complete lack of information on the issue, many homosexuals were not even sure themselves about their own sexual orientation. (A woman, who was married and had a child, had never heard of, or even thought about homosexuality until she came across the English word ‘lesbian’ on the Internet, and discovered that she herself was one.) Conversely, people who had no doubt whatsoever about their homosexual orientation still did not dare to be open about it.

By Mr. Xiongqi

I began to participate in homosexual activities in the early 1990s. I once took part in a discussion session where psychiatrists, volunteers from the Women’s Hotline, and a few individuals discussed homosexual issues; there were no homosexuals who took part as such. One meeting was held in a very quiet bar in a small lane, for a ‘birthday party’. We meticulously designed and printed the invitations, we elected a ‘Discussion Commissioner’, an ‘Eating-er, we began to organize sports events and discussion ses- sions. We elected a ‘Discussion Commissioner’, an ‘Eating-tongzhi’. ‘Women Tongzhi’ neither had a fixed leadership nor fixed participants in its activities. It also had no fixed place.

The first National Women Tongzhi Conference was held in Beijing in October 1998. Altogether about thirty women and girls participated. After the Conference, a board of five mem- bers was established, and an internal magazine, Sky, was ini- tiated. Since then, women tonguehs have started to use both inter- national and national funds to organize their activities.

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The Remaking of a Cambodian-American Drag Queen

By Karen Quintiliani

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et five Cambodian-American men the journey home in 1995 transformed their gay identities – identities imagined through the collective activities and memories of a Southern California Cambodian gay group they helped to establish. ‘Real khity’ in this group – or those who adopt transvestite lives – socialize with men who have sex with men exclusively as well-married and women who have clandestine sexual relations with other men. However, the group members (like those taking the journey home) who successfully adopt a male appearance, work in male professions, attract (primarily) Anglo-American partners, and resist family pressures to marry, are the ones that define drag as the cultural equivalent to being khity, thereby legitimizing their unique gay identities. During drag performances, the members of the group depict Cambodian American and feminine cultural symbols – the traditional Cambodian Apsara dancer and Miss America – to temporarily embody their feminine selves. They also utilize drag performances to initiate ‘closeted’ Cambodians into the group, and to educate non-Cambodians about the cultural role and (tacit) acceptance of being khity in Cambodian society.

The trip to Cambodia provided an opportunity to show their Cambodian ‘drag queen sisters’ how in America they can transform themselves while maintaining the ‘heart’ of a woman. I went on the trip as the ‘real woman’ of the group, a designation that describes my role as a confidante and researcher in the gay group since 1992. However, being a real woman travelling with five Cambodians who appear to be men, provided a critical view of the expected separation between men and women in Cambodia and the power held by Westerners in a country in the grips of poverty. The events that unfolded during our trip changed how these self-described gay Cambodian men saw themselves, and how the group members expressed their being khity, as they saw videos and heard accounts about the conditions of their khity counterparts in Cambodia.

In Battambang, the second largest city in Cambodia, the Cambodian Americans discovered how their khity counterpart-  ers carve out social positions and sexual spaces. Shifting between gender representations and sex roles – like drag requires – blurs the boundaries and the discreet way sexual relationships between men occur in Cambodia. Three of the khity live in a brothel and cook and clean for the women, only occasionally taking customers themselves. Mai Cha, who means ‘the old mother’, is divorced and has grown-up children. He bristled at his friend’s offer when they were told by some family members they reunited with in Cambodia, to ‘feed a family for a year’ (in Cambodia).

The Cambodian Americans also reunited with a long-time Anglo-American gay friend running a social service agency in Cambodian villages in and around Phnom Penh, the largest and most urbanized city in Cambodia. They offered the Cambodian Americans the choice of any ‘matech’ Cambodian man at the agency. The Cambodian Americans bristled at their friend’s offer when they were told by some of the Cambodian men that they feared losing their jobs or access to English language classes if they did not agree to engage in sexual liaisons. Their friend appeared to exploit the men’s poverty and to misinterpret a social system that allows for male intimacy without the homosexual label common in contemporary Western societies.

Until these Cambodian gay group members could travel to their homeland, they imagined being khity through a set of visual symbols – the traditional Cambodian Apsara dancer and Miss America – to temporarily embody their feminine selves. When they returned to the USA they no longer held drag events as a way to portray their identities as Cambodian and gay. Rather, being khity became a social responsibility to financially support those they reunited with in Cambodia, to sponsor HIV/AIDS fundraisers for Cambodia, and in some cases to return to their homeland to nurture relationships with Cambodian men they met on their first trip home. Stuart Hall (1990) describes identity as a ‘production’ con- stantly in flux as individuals and communities reinterpret experiences in diaspora and from the homeland. By understanding identity as Hall suggests, we gain insight into how sexualities in Cambodia and in diaspora are influenced by transnational relationships and the conditions of poverty.

By Karen Quintiliani

The Cambodian Americans (shown with their faces concealed) pose with their Cambodian ‘sisters’. The photo illustrates the various ways in which Cambodian men who adopt the role of the khity present themselves. However, the young man on the far right is considered an eligible bachelor and occasionally socializes with the khity.

References

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minority puritanical and homophobic voice in India became mainstream. The new homophobia was made overtly manifest by the British law of 1860, Section 377, Indian Penal Code, still in force in India, whereas homophobia between consenting adults was decriminalized in England in 1967. Section 377 penalizes ‘unnatural’ sexual acts with ‘imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.’

A campaign currently being waged against it and ABVA’s petition to declare it unconstitutional is pending before the Delhi High Court. Though there are few convictions under the law, police use it to terrorize and blackmail gay men, many of whom are married to women and cannot afford public exposure.

More positive pre-colonial narrative traditions persist alongside the new homophobia, and are visible in some fiction and in popular cinema, which from its beginnings has displayed an intense interest in same-sex bonding. From the late 1860s onward, openly gay and bisexual writers like Sunini Namjoshi, Vikram Seth, Firdaus Kana- ga, and Bhupen Khakhur drew worldwide attention. The Indian media in English, having developed a pro-human rights stance from its origins in the national independence movement, generally reports positively both on Indian and international LGBT movements. Today, there are many gay celebrities and there is much play with gender and sexuality in the performing and fine arts, and in the worlds of fash- ion and design.

Scholarly and journalistic interest in the field has accompanied the growth of LGBT movements, as is evident from Kripal’s work on homoeotic mysticism and the recent anthology of scholarly perspectives. An anthology of writings by contemporary lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, and the recent anthology of scholarly essays, Queering India, examining homosexuality from multidisciplinary perspectives. An anthology of writings by contemporary lesbians, Facing the Mirror (1999), and one of writings about gay men in the twentieth centu- ry, Yarana (1999), have been well received in India.

The silence has been broken in the Indian academy too. In the last couple of years, courses on homosexuality in literature have been taught at Delhi University, the law school at Bangalore University, and at a major university in New Delhi. A premier college in women’s college in Delhi held a lesbian and gay film festival.

Oral histories of gay people being documented by gay and gay-friendly film-makers and on television talk shows. Civil rights and women’s move- ments have become more open to dis- cussing sexuality. In 1998, when the right-wing Shiv Sena attacked the film Fire for its lesbian theme, enabled a public debate on homosexuality. For the first time, lesbian and gay movements, and an identification of such, demonstrated in the streets along with civil rights groups. Nevertheless in 2001 national women’s organizations refused to allow lesbian groups carrying banners with the word ‘lesbian’ to march in the 8 March International Women’s Day rally in Delhi. Ironically, the gov- ernment-sponsored Women’s Day fair allowed the lesbian groups to set up a booth and use the word.

The visible LGBT community has grown exponentially in the cities. Lesb- ian and gay phone helplines and online chat groups have been set up; regular parties and picnics, and meet- ings for parents of lesbians and gays are also held. These types of community life fit well in with Indian cultural mores, as does the play of different kinds of eroticism, affiliative links, and fictive kinship networks.

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By Karen Quintiliani

The Cambodian Americans (shown with their faces concealed) pose with their Cambodian ‘sisters’. The photo illustrates the various ways in which Cambodian men who adopt the role of the khity present themselves. However, the young man on the far right is considered an eligible bachelor and occasionally socializes with the khity.