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Homosexuality in India: Past and Present

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Birthday in Beijing
Women Tongzhi Organizing in 1990s China

By Mr. Xiaoppi

In the mid-1990s, two or three people began to organize the first homosexual (or tongzhi, the word most commonly used nowadays) activities in Beijing. During the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the activist Wu Chunsheng organized a lesbian dancing party for both Chinese and foreign women. It was held at the Tongzhi's Birthday.'

The riots exploded when the police raided a bar (the Stonewall) in New York's Greenwich Village in June 1969, and gays fought back. The riots lasted for a long time. The Stonewall became a symbol of gay liberation.

In 1996, there were still no homosexual bars in Beijing. An activity was organized by Susan Jolly and Wu Chunsheng to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall riots. “To avoid police attention, we told all the people we knew to go to a very quiet bar in a small lane, for a ‘birthday party.’ We even bought a birthday cake. Sixty people came, among them eight women. This was the first time that this many women tongzhi had ever turned up in a public place. We thought of a way to get around them. We sang ‘Happy Birthday’ and cut the cake. I announced: ‘Can you guess whose birthday it is today?’ Come and whisper it in my ear, and if you get it right, you get a present!’ (which consisted of wrapped up condoms and sweets). Everyone started to ask each other whose birthday it was. Those who knew about Stonewall told those who did not, who then came and whispered the answer to me: ‘Today is the commemoration day of the American gay movement.’ A young man, having just heard the Stonewall story for the first time, ran over to me and whispered, “I know! I know! Today is the birthday of all of us!” I then whispered what he had said to other people: ‘Today is the birthday of all of us!’ I thought, that is probably what the tongzhi movement ultimately means – we are unit- ed, we have a common birthday. From that day on, that bar became the first homosexual bar in Beijing.

By Ruth Vanita

Research >

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 perversion. Before the 1990s, many homosexuals, especially lesbians, did not know that there were other people with the same orientation; they had no one to turn to for help. 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.

This paper is a part of a chapter in Hsiung Ping-Chen, Maria Jaschok, and Cecilia Menjivar, editors, Asian Homosexualities

Research >

India

Homosexuality in India: Past and Present

By Ruth Vanita

In 1990 the magazine Bombay Dot (Bombay Friends) adopted an AIDS policy. In 1991, AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (Anti-AIDS Discrimination Campaign), known as ARVA, published its pioneering report East India: The 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. Sahajyogi, Gitsi Thadani’s short

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Editors’ note >

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Research >

India

When I was active in the women’s movement in Delhi from 1978 to 1990 as founding co-editor of Manushi, India’s first feminist journal, homosexuality was rarely if ever discussed in left-wing, civil rights, or women’s movements, or at Delhi University, where I taught. Among the earliest newspaper reports I saw on the subject were those about female couples committing suicide, leaving behind notes declaring their undying love. In 1987, the writing of two female police constables, Leela and Urmila, in central India, made national headlines and led to a debate on lesbianism. The women married each other outside the ambit of any movement and with the support of Urmila’s family.

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The Remaking of a Cambodian-American Drag Queen

By Karen Quintiliani

Five Cambodian-American men journeyed from the United States to Cambodia as part of a historical and cultural exploration. This story is an account of their experiences as they embraced their identities as drag queens in Cambodian society.

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

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ovel 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 khnyet’ in this group – or those who adopt transvestite lives – socialize with men who have sex with men exclusively as well as married men 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 khnyet, thereby legitimizing their unique gay identities. During drag performances, the members of the group depict Cambodian and American feminine cultural symbols – the traditional Cambodian Apsara dancer and Miss America – to temporarily embody their feminine selves. They also utilize drag performances to initiate ‘closet’ Cambodians into the group, and to educate non-Cambodians about the cultural role and (tacit) acceptance of being khnyet in Cambodian society.

The trip 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 ‘real’ and ‘khnyet’ lives. 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 khnyet, as they saw videos and heard accounts about the conditions of their khnyet counterparts in Cambodia.

In Battambang, the second largest city in Cambodia, the Cambodia Americans discovered how their khnyet counterparts 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 khnyet live in a brothel and cook and clean for the women, only occasionally taking customers themselves. Mai Cha, which means ‘the old mother’, is divorced and has grown-up children. He doesn’t want his family to fulfill his desire for male companionship. He is poor, homeless, and ostracized for having left his family, but not necessarily for having sex with other men. The other two khnyet live in the temple compound and have a vow of celibacy in order to serve the temple and honor the loss of partners during the Khmer Rouge years.

Sexual relationships between single men and khnyet in Battambang are either arranged or take place through random meetings; in either case the khnyet provides the young men with money or food as well as spiritual legitimation. The Cambodian Americans played the role of khnyet through the sexual exchange system, rather than as Cambodian-American drag queens. Before they left Battambang, they gave up their ‘womanhood’ by giving their reserved gowns and accessories to their khnyet counterparts, realizing that ‘the cost of one dress could feed a family for a year [in Cambodia].’

The Cambodia 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. Through his contacts, they approached a Cambodian-American woman who offered the Cambodia Americans the choice of any ‘mate’ Cambodian man at the agency. The Cambodia 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 heterosexual label common in contemporary Western societies.

Until these Cambodia gay group members could travel to their homeland, they imagined being khnyet through a set of visual and textual symbols available to them. 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 khnyet became a social responsibility to financially support HIV/AIDS fundraisers for Cambodia, and in some cases to return to their homeland and to nurture relationships with Cambodian men they met on their first trip home. Stuart Hall (1990) describes identity as a ‘production’ constantly in flux as individuals and communities reinterpret experiences in diaspora and from the homeland. By understanding identity as Hall suggests, we gain an insight into how sexualities in Cambodia and in diaspora are influenced by transnational relationships and the conditions of poverty.

References


Karen Quintiliani, MA is a PhD candidate in anthropology at UCLA. Her dissertation examines the impact of an emerging welfare state on Cambodian refugee families and the rise in neo-liberal forms of governance to solve social problems.

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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 AVPA’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 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 Suniti Namjoshi, Vikram Seth, Firdaus Kana ga, and Bhupen Khakhar 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 fashion and design.

Scholarly and journalistic interest in the field has accompanied the growth of LGBT movements, as is evident from Kripal’s work on homoerotic mysticism 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 century, Yaraana (2009), 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; the Law School at the City University of New York; and a premier woman’s college in Delhi held a lesbian and gay film festival. Oral histories of gay people are being documented by gay and gay-friendly film-makers and on television talk shows. Civil rights and women’s movements have become more open to discussing sexuality. The national journal Kshema, and a premier woman’s college in Delhi held a lesbian and gay film festival. Oral histories of gay people are being documented by gay and gay-friendly film-makers and on television talk shows. Civil rights and women’s movements have become more open to discussing sexuality. The national journal Kshema, and a premier woman’s college in Delhi held a lesbian and gay film festival. Oral histories of gay people are being documented by gay and gay-friendly film-makers and on television talk shows. Civil rights and women’s movements have become more open to discussing sexuality.

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