Homosexuality in India: Past and Present

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Homosexuality in India: Past and Present

By Ruch Vanece

In 1990 the magazine Bombay Dost (Bombay Friends) appeared. It was a ground-breaking publication. In 1991, AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (Anti-AIDS Discrimination Campaign), known as ARVA, published its pioneering report, ‘The New AIDS Situation in 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 publication of this book, and particularly the focus on same-sex love in South Asia is serious- ly under-researched as compared to East Asia and even West Asia. With a few exceptions, South Asian scholars by large ignore materials on homose- xuality or interpret them as hetero- sexual. As a result, in his introduction to The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage (1995), editor Claude Summers claims that the silence of ancient and medieval India on same-sex love is a ‘subject per- haps reflects the generally conservative mores of the people’. Salerni Kidwai and I had been sepa- rately collecting materials. In two 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, with- out any extended history of overt per- secution. These forms include invisibilized partnerships, highly visi- ble romances, and institutionalized rit- tuals 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 terms, and codes to distinguish homo- erotic love and those inclined to it. This confirms Swett and Zwikos’ work on ancient Indian mores. We report on 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 sexualists, as Foucault claims it was. We also found evidence of male homoerotic subcultures flourish- ing in some medieval Indian cities. Like the erotic temple sculptures at Khajur- abo and Konarak, ancient and medieval temples in India, we believe that the whole range of sexual behaviour was known in pre-colonial India. British nineteenth-century adminis- trators were in charge of organizing a fundraising party for generally anti-sex and specifically homophobic attitudes into India. Under colonial rule, what used to be a 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 whis- pered 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.

Birthday in Beijing
Women Tongzhi Organizing in 1990s’ China

By He Xiaopei

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 homosexuals who took part as such. One meeting was held in a living room on a weekday afternoon, the last of a series of sessions for medical research. In the main, the attitude of the psychiatrists and social workers was characterized by sympathy, albeit mixed with non-recognition and a lack of understanding. The psychiatrist spoke of the homosexuals who had come to the hospital to be cured, who were unhappy and sometimes suicidal. Encouraged by this atmosphere of debate, one man ‘came out’ about his homosexuality. Afterwards, he and I started to use a different language, different experiences and feelings, to demonstrate that not all homosexuals live lives of tragedy and suffering. I met a few homosexual people at that meeting. We realized that we needed our own space to discuss and share our experiences, and help each other. By 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 States 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 ‘Nightman’, a disco where many homosexuals still like to go. Two coaches full of women came from the Women’s Con- ference, and over a dozen Beijing women participated as well. However, openly organizing activities in the name of homo- sexuality attracted the government’s attention. That evening the disco was full of plain-clothes and military police, and afterwards Wu was detained. Also, in 1998 and 1999, two activists were searched at customs when entering China, and all materials that they were carrying related to homosexual- ity were confiscated. Yet, the Chinese homosexual move- ments have continued to develop, slowly but steadily, over the years.

Tongzhi spaces first appeared in Beijing in the summer of 1995, when a Chinese man, the aforementioned Wu Chunsheng, and Susan Jolly, an Englishwoman, began to organize tongzhi get-togethers every Wednesday evening at a non- tongzhi bar. To try and overcome homonega- suals, the Wednesday gatherings incessantly changed locations. Initially only men tongzhi came to the meetings, since women tongzhi faced more barriers to taking part in nightlife. But women-tongzhi activities continued. One woman tongzhi by the name of Sakhiyani organized informal get-togethers, with a few people eating together and danc- ing at someone’s home. We were very relaxed about who could join us, and did not stipulate sexual orientation as the criterion. We invited everyone who was interested to participate. I was alone- ly organized by Susan Jolly, and took place at her foreign res- ident’s compound. Later, activities were organized by Chinese women and were held in Chinese people’s homes. 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 went to a bar to see whether we could use a clothes police in the bar. We thought of a way to get around them. We sang ‘Happy Happy- day’ 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...
The Remaking of a Cambodian-American Drag Queen

By Karen Quintiliani

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

The Cambodian Americans journeyed to Cambodia 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 khtey’ 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, are conscious of being men, thereby legitimizing their unique gender 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 khtey 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 gay and straight men 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 khtey, as they saw videos and heard accounts about the conditions of their khtey counterparts in Cambodia.

In Battambang, the second largest city in Cambodia, the Cambodian Americans discovered how their khtey 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 khtey live in a brothel and cook and clean for the women, only occasionally taking customers themselves. Mai Chaa, which means ‘the old mother’, is divorced and has grown-up children. He abandoned 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 khtey live in the temple compound and have a very vague vocation in order to serve the monastery in paying off the loss of partners during the Khmer Rouge years.

Sexual relationships between single men and khtey in Battambang are either arranged or take place through random meetings; in either case the khtey provides the young man with money or food as well as a sexual gratification. The Cambodian Americans played the role of khtey through the sexual exchange system, rather than as Cambodian-American drag queens. Before they left Battambang, they gave up their ‘womanhood’ by giving their sequined gowns and accessories to their khtey counterparts, realizing that “[the cost of] one dress could 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 ‘macho’ companionship to portray their identities as Cambodian and gay. Rather, they recognized the social and cultural 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 khtey became a social responsibility to financially support their male counterparts, who engage in sexual liaisons. Their friend appeared to exploit these transnational relationships and the conditions of poverty.

References

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