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Review Article

Homosexuality in India

Devinder Mohan Thappa, Nidhi Singh, Sowmya Kaimal

Department of Dermatology and STD, Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER),
Pondicherry - 605 006, India

Address for correspondence:

Dr. Devinder Mohan Thappa, Department of Dermatology and STD, JIPMER, Pondicherry - 605 006, India.

E-mail: dmthappa@gmail.com

Abstract

Homosexuality can be described as the orientation and inclination of a person to have sexual relations with a person of his or her own sex. The clustering of Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) cases among male homosexuals in the initial phase of the HIV epidemic in the USA and a few other Western countries led to a misleading notion that the disease afflicted only “reckless” male homosexuals and it was often referred to as the ‘gay plague’ or ‘gay cancer’, ‘gay’ being the current vogue word for homosexuals. Very little is known about the practice of homosexuality in contemporary India. According to Ashok Row-Kavi, a self-acclaimed homosexual activist, the number of exclusively or predominantly homosexual men in India may be over 50 million. A vast majority of them are married and living with their wives. A culturally identifiable group known by the Urdu term “hijra” lives in most parts of India and are known to depend, at least partly, for their livelihood on working as male prostitutes. Most hijras are castrated males and dress as females. In addition to a large section of the hijra community, there are many full-time or part-time male prostitutes in India. Some of them live in red-light areas of metropolitan cities; many seek male clients by offering massage services in parks, beaches, hotels, and houses. Male prostitution is increasingly visible in India. In Delhi there are as many as twenty “agencies” offering “handsome masseurs” in the classifieds of the newspapers (Hindustan Times).

Key words: Hijras, homosexuality, India, male prostitutes

Homosexuality - Problem of identification

Homosexuality can be described as the orientation and inclination of a person to have sexual relations with a person of his or her own sex.^[1] It is difficult, however, to identify a person as a homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual because the behavioral expression of the sexual inclination of a person may take a multitude of forms and may change in their life cycle. This is why in their analysis of sexual behavior data of white males and females in the USA, Kinsey *et al.*^[2,3] developed a six-point scale to identify a person's position in the heterosexual-homosexual scale, from his or her history of sexual behavior. Because of the lack of any such behavioral survey data, such identification is not possible for the Indian population. In India people are commonly identified as homosexuals if they have experienced, as adults, any kind of explicit sexual act with any person of their own sex.

Male homosexuality and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

The clustering of AIDS cases among male homosexuals in the initial phase of the HIV epidemic in the USA and a few other Western countries led to a misleading notion that the disease afflicted only “reckless” male homosexuals and it was often referred to as the “gay plague” or “gay cancer”, “gay” being the current vogue word for homosexuals.^[1] Recent studies have shown that HIV is spreading everywhere, more through heterosexual relations than through any other mode of transmission. It is, however, true that the risk of HIV infection is greater for persons who practice anal intercourse and this type of intercourse is more common between homosexual partners than between heterosexual partners.

Historical evidence of homosexuality in India

Vatsayana's Kamasutra (written between the first and the fourth century AD) refers to the practice of

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eunuchs and male servants giving oral sex to their male patrons and masters respectively.^[1] Some erotic sculptures of medieval Hindu temples depict lesbian acts. The Muslim rulers in India are reported to have maintained harems of young boys. During the British rule, sodomy (anal intercourse) was made illegal under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, enacted in 1861: this legislation is still in force. Indian homosexual activists think that because of this legal provision, male homosexuals are often subjected to undue harassment and blackmail.^[4]

Current situation of homosexuality in India

Very little is known about the practice of homosexuality in contemporary India. According to Ashok Row-Kavi,^[5] a self-acclaimed homosexual activist, the number of exclusively or predominantly homosexual men in India may be over 50 million. His estimate is based, however, on the assumption that the prevalence of homosexual behavior is not less than what Kinsey *et al.*^[2,3] found for white American males in 1938-1947. However, recent surveys, as shown above, have shown that Kinsey *et al.*^[2,3] overestimated the number of homosexuals in the USA.

A vast majority of them are married and living with their wives, reflecting the cultural situation in South Asian countries, which obliges all men and women to marry members of the opposite sex, whatever may be their sexual orientation.^[1] The most common locations of the first homosexual experience in both regions were parks and toilets. Relatives, mostly male cousins and uncles, were the second most common category of first homosexual partners, strangers being the most common category. Mutual masturbation was mentioned as the most common type of homosexual act.

Strong prejudices against homosexuality in India, enhanced by the popular misconception that it is at least partly responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS in India, and the awareness among some Indian homosexual activists that the government should not continue to ignore homosexuals' needs in its AIDS prevention programs, prompted them to organize homosexuals in formal groups for social and political purposes.^[1] The Government of India has already recognized the need for intervention programs among homosexuals and has taken the initiative to collect information necessary for the purpose.

Hijras and male prostitutes

A culturally identifiable group known by the Urdu term "hijra" lives in most parts of India and are known to depend, at least partly, for their livelihood on working as male prostitutes. Most hijras are

castrated males and dress as females. A few are hermaphrodites that are born with ambiguously male-like genitals.^[1] As devotees of the Mother Goddess "Bahuchara Mata", their sacred powers are contingent upon their asexuality. In reality, however, many hijras are prostitutes. This sexual activity undermines their culturally valued sacred role.

They adopt female dress and some other aspects of female behavior. Hijras traditionally earn their living by collecting alms and receiving payment for performances at weddings, births, and festivals.^[1,6] The central feature of their culture is their devotion to Bahuchara Mata, one of the many Mother Goddesses worshipped all over India, for whom emasculation is carried out. The hijras are commonly believed, by the larger society, to be intersexed impotent men, who undergo emasculation in which all or part of the genitals are removed. The castration operation is usually performed by a hijra called a dai-ma crudely and under insanitary conditions. It is legally punishable, but reported to be performed secretly in large numbers. This identification with the Mother Goddess is the source of the hijras' claim for both their special place in Indian society and the traditional belief in their power to curse or confer blessings on male infants.

Hijras live predominantly in the cities of North India, where they find the greatest opportunity to perform their traditional roles, but small groups of hijras are found all over India, in the south as well as the north. Seven "houses," or subgroups, comprise the hijra community; each of these has a guru or leader, all of whom live in Bombay.^[6] The houses have equal status, but one, Laskarwallah, has the special function of mediating disputes which arise among the others. Each house has its own history, as well as rules particular to it. For example, members of a particular house are not allowed to wear certain colors. Hijra houses appear to be patterned after the *gharanas* (literally, houses), or family lineages among classical musicians, each of which is identified with its own particular musical style. Though the culturally distinct features of the hijra houses have almost vanished, the structural feature remains.

The most significant relationship in the hijra community is that of the guru (master, teacher) and chela (disciple).^[6] When an individual decides to (formally) join the hijra community, he is taken to Bombay to visit one of the seven major gurus, usually the guru of the person who has brought him there. At the initiation ritual, the guru gives the novice a new, female name. The novice vows

to obey the guru and the rules of the community. The guru then presents the new chela with some gifts. The chela, or more likely, someone on her behalf, pays an initiation fee and the guru writes the chela's name in her record book. This guru-chela relationship is a lifelong bond of reciprocity in which the guru is obligated to help the chela and the chela is obligated to be loyal and obedient to the guru.

Hijras live together in communes generally of about 5 to 15 members, and the heads of these local groups are also called guru.^[6] Hijras make no distinctions within their community based on caste origin or religion, although in some parts of India, Gujarat, for example, Muslim and Hindu hijras reportedly live apart. In Bombay, Delhi, Chandigarh and Bangalore, hijras of Muslim, Christian, and Hindu origin live in the same houses.

In addition to the hierarchical guru-chela relationship, there is fictive kinship by which hijras relate to each other.^[6] Rituals exist for "taking a daughter" and the "daughters" of one "mother" consider themselves "sisters" and relate on a reciprocal, affectionate basis. Other fictive kinship relations, such as "grandmother" or "mother's sister" (aunt) are the basis of warm and reciprocal regard. Fictive kin exchange small amounts of money, clothing, jewelry, and sweets to formalize their relationship. Such relationships connect hijras all over India, and there is a constant movement of individuals who visit their gurus and fictive kin in different cities. Various annual gatherings, both religious and secular, attract thousands of hijras from all over India."

Ways of life of hijras

Traditionally, hijras earn their livelihood by receiving payment for their musical performance at homes on occasions of male childbirth, weddings, and other festivals, as well as by begging.^[1] Because of their special identification with the Hindu god Shiva and the mother goddess Bahuchara Mata, they are believed by many to have the power to confer prosperity and health on newborn babies and newly wed couples and also the power to do harm to them. With the erosion of such beliefs in contemporary India, hijras are reported to increasingly engage themselves as male prostitutes.

Hijras live in all parts of India, but they concentrate more in north Indian cities where they have greater opportunities to earn their living by performing their traditional role as household performers on festive

occasions.^[1] The total population of hijras in India is not known, as in censuses many of them report themselves as female. The unofficial estimate of their population in India varies from 50,000 to 500,000. There are myths and folklore associating Bahuchara Mata, the major object of the hijra devotions, with transvestism and transsexuality.

Sexual practices of hijras

Hijras in India, in addition to earning their livelihood as performers, engage themselves in sexual activity with men for money or for satisfying their own homosexual desires, as long as they are physically attractive or capable of doing so.^[1] There are also nineteenth century reports of kidnapping of small boys by hijras for the purpose of sodomy or prostitution. Most hijras seem to engage in casual prostitution by offering sexual favors to men in exchange for money. Some others, particularly those with strong feminine identity, are involved in relatively long-term relationships with men who may be known as their "husbands". Having a "husband" in an economically reciprocal and emotionally satisfying relationship is a preferred alternative for those hijras who openly engage themselves in sexual relations with men.

Almost nothing is known about the sexual techniques hijras practice or are asked to practice when they perform the role of a prostitute.^[1] It is very likely that they are often passive partners in anal intercourse, without the use of condoms, thus making themselves highly vulnerable to HIV and other STD infections.

Male prostitutes

In addition to a large section of the hijra community, there are many full-time or part-time male prostitutes in India.^[1] Some of them live in red-light areas of metropolitan cities; many seek male clients by offering massage services in parks, beaches, hotels, and houses. Thousands of homeless and poor boys and young men employed in various establishments and firms are compelled to provide sexual services to their male bosses in return for their job security. Young men who work as helpers to highway truck drivers in their long trips provide such services.

Male prostitution is increasingly visible in India.^[7] In Delhi there are as many as twenty "agencies" offering "handsome masseurs" in the classifieds of newspapers (Hindustan Times). They offer both in and out services, although the facilities are usually very basic. Most western clients are visited at their hotels. Local middle class Indians are also now using these services. Fees are discussed over the phone, typically 1000-3000 Rupees.

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Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)

1. Under which section of the Indian penal code is sodomy illegal

a. 377

b. 362

c. 369

d. 371

2. scale is used to identify a person's position in homosexual – heterosexual scale

a. Kinsley

b. Henley

c. Bensley

d. Denley

3. Where do all the gurus of seven communities of hijras live?

a. Bombay

b. Delhi

c. Calcutta

d. Bangalore

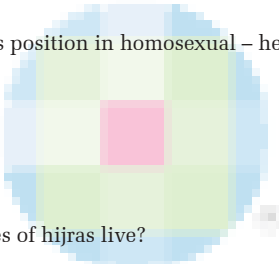
4. What is the name of goddess of hijras?

a. Meera mata

b. Bahuchara mata

c. Raani mata

d. Heera mata



ANSWERS TO MCQs

1. 377, 2. Kinsley, 3. Bombay, 4. Bahuchara mata