

AGING AS A PROCESS FACED BY MEN OF ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES: A SOCIOLOGICAL ENQUIRY IN KOLKATA, INDIA

Abstract

While several developments have been made in looking into the realities of queer lives in India, not much has been told about aging gay men. Even with the reading down of Section 377 in 2018, gay men in India keep facing certain subjective difficulties that reflect their marginality following a double pronged subjectivity: one, of being gay in India and the other of being aged. With this thought in mind, this chapter looks into the nitty-gritty of aging and being a gay man, living in the heart of a metropolitan city like that of Kolkata, India. The author entails in an in-depth qualitative research in order to conclude the myriad complexities in aging as a process faced by queer men.

Keywords: Aging, men, homosexuality, hegemonic, masculinity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Through the various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness; from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described; pedagogical controls and medical treatments were organized; around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandished the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination. (Foucault, 1978; p.36).

Homosexuality in India has been a criminal offence under the nationwide anti-sodomy law, Section 377, first introduced by the British colonial state in 1860s, which was then retained in the postcolonial penal code. This law has been time and again used to harass same-sex sexual subjects throughout judicial history and has created an atmosphere of fear for men of alternative sexualities in Indian society (Puri, 2016). Moreover, even from a societal standpoint, there has prevailed a sense of morality and a code of conduct which defined what love is, how loving as a process should be conducted, and within whom. We can historically trace the evolution of this notion of love that has taken shape in the minds of all Indians, and men of alternative sexualities, through social institutions like the media, family and marriage. The norm of sexual development indeed seems to be defined through legal and societal sanctions which gained its legitimacy through the process of “normalization”. This has been the case in India.

What it is to be a man depends a lot on certain notions regarding masculinity. Stigma (Goffman, 1963) is one such notion or an image that gives people a sense of what a man is. It is something which defines what being a man entails, for instance, men have to embody a stereotypical notion of a virile, strong, healthy person who is also very active in whatever he does. Appearing weak, being highly sensitive, expressing fear, vulnerability, or self-doubt, showing love and affection for other men, acting flamboyant, or being nurturing or caring are all characters that don't suit a man. These latter features seem to be attached to qualities that are not accepted as “masculine” and are stereotypically attached to a notion of femininity and are also thought to be true for a gay man's behaviour. Interestingly the stigma that is related to being a man is also what one would relate to a certain age of a man, who is essentially young, where the body doesn't face certain natural processes of aging which brings in a sense of vulnerability (Franklin, 2012).

Another lens through which men and masculinities can be looked at is through Connell's (1987) concept of 'hegemonic masculinity.' She described a variety of masculine identities combined around expectations of what masculinity is presumed to be. Masculinity as an ideology is produced and reproduced by society, culture and language in our daily life. There is also an ordering of versions of femininity and masculinity at the level of the whole society, in some ways analogous to the patterns of face-to-face relationship within institutions.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

'Hegemonic masculinity' is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works. The cultural ideal of

masculinity need not correspond at all closely to the actual personalities of the majority of men. The imagination of a hegemonic man involves the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures, such as the film characters played by John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone. The most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual; and it is closely linked to the institution of marriage; and a key form of subordinated masculinity is homosexual. Hegemonic masculine men are imagined as being a part of a heterosexual family set-up, with a wife and with children. It is the type of masculinity which occupies the highest position in a given pattern of gender relations (Connell, 1987).

It is important to note here that the hegemonic masculine figure is not only a heterosexual figure, but a celebrated figure of a younger, able bodied man who is able to maintain an image that reflects cultural ideals, institutional power and political power (Connell, 1995), which are hard to maintain after attaining a certain age or after retirement due to the legal and bodily limitations surrounding the process of aging.

Research on aging masculinities have seem to toe the lines of an expected "life course" perspective. This perspective has unconsciously missed out on an entire aging population of alternative sexualities. Edward H. Thompson Jr., in his article, 'Expressions Of Manhood: Reconciling Sexualities, Masculinities and Aging, published in 2004, talks of a "heterosexism erasure" that has always taken place in research on aging masculinities, where life experiences of gay men have always been neglected while talking about aging masculinities. According to him,

Because this perspective twists the range of heterosexual masculinities into a single standard and converts the behavioral norm of heterosexuality into normal or healthy manhood, gay men are not identified as a sexual minority, but as sexual deviants. In addition, whenever gerontologists elect to ignore sexualities and presume that everyone is heterosexual, or assume that differences in sexualities have little or no consequence on aging, the field contributes to the maintenance of a hegemonic version of masculinity as much as it homogenizes the sexualities among older adults.

There seems to be a lifespan development perspective that has been assumed amongst scholars who research on aging masculinities. Take for granted a lifespan development perspective that is what Judith Baker terms "heteronormative," in her chapter in *Gay and Lesbian Aging: Research and Future Directions* (Herdt and Devries, 2004). In such a perspective, notions of grand parenting, spousal relationships and marriage come to the fore while gay men's experience of the family and even their confrontation with the institution of marriage might be very different from the way heterosexual men deal with them. Moreover, in researching aging masculinities what is talked of in most cases is late-life family care. Kin relationships play a huge part in helping deal with the process of aging among heterosexual men. However, in conducting such research, it seems that the question of the gay male aging body seems to be turned a blind eye to. Especially important is the case of older gay aging men who do not live with a partner and have to be prey to the physical, mental, financial, and such other pressures faced by an aging body.

III.METHODOLOGY

In this work, I have conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with three men of alternative sexualities, aged 57, 62 and 65 who live in Kolkata. Their identities are not disclosed in this work and will be referred to as Mr 'A', 'B' and 'C' respectively. I conducted interviews with five more men who also belong to the queer community in Kolkata, regarding their notions of queer aging masculinities. These men have friends and acquaintances that are aged gay men living in Kolkata and have also been asked about what are their perceptions on these aged men's lives. Their ages are, 21, 24, 26, 31 and 32 years of age. Lastly, I have also conducted unstructured interviews with ten other men, who do not have any friends who can be called aged queer men. This latter group belongs to the age margin of 18-36.

I have engaged in in-depth conversations over the telephone with all my respondents, which has provided me the data required to write this paper. This research tries to reach a possible answer for the following questions: How ageism as a discriminatory practice against people belonging to an older age, relevant and is confronted by men of alternative sexualities and what aging entails for men of alternative sexualities in Kolkata?

IV. AGING MASCULINITIES AND QUEERNESS

Raul C. Schiavi in his book, 'Aging and Male Sexuality' (1999), correctly points out:

It is likely that older homosexual men who became socialized in a repressive social climate are less inclined to participate in the gay subculture, less open about their sexual orientation and less prone to volunteer for studies about homosexuality.

It is commonly assumed that a group of people who are generally marginalised and suppressed within the society and have faced a similar degree of discrimination will have a similar standpoint (Harding, 2004) or a similar social position of being identified as the marginalised. These people will share similar experiences within the ambit of a patriarchal, capitalist society that generally tends to celebrate those who fit into the schematic notion of the "normal". The performance of this "normal" relates to falling in line with the larger mass of populace, who are produced as similar, if not the same, and this "sameness" is reflected in lifestyles, cultural practices, behavioural patterns, life choices, performance of gender, practice of sexuality, etc. However, some groups of people who do not adhere to this mass performance of living and existence are discriminated against.

In this essay I would like to argue against such an assumption of sociality and fellow-feeling among similarly marginalised groups of men. It is not always that people who share or have shared similar experiences of marginalisation will actually empathise with each other or stand with each other to question and do away with the power structure that marginalises them. This seems to be very true for the queer male community in Kolkata.

When I look at the men of alternative sexualities in Kolkata through the lens of aging, certain patterns of discrimination are immediately revealed. All of my respondents have talked about how most queer men of Kolkata are ageists to a large extent and openly discriminate older queer men for expressing their desire to date or engage in intimacy. They

have extensively talked about this problem which builds itself up in a gay dating mobile application called “Grindr”, where one finds men who seek men for friendship, meet ups, dating, having an intimate moment, establishing a sexual relationship or other activities. It is on this site that most queer men reveal their desires for men who are younger than them, which apparently seems to relate to the latter’s ability to be either “interesting”, or their sexual prowess and capacity to have sex.

According to Romit, a twenty year old student of Chemistry, we cannot really generalise this fact that people are always attracted to men who are younger than them. He gives several examples where different men have set an age limit of 45 year old, who could text them or seek sexual favours, while they have been in their 20s. There are many young adults to prefer to date elder men just because they feel more connected to someone elder, on a romantic and sexual level. However, whenever it comes to someone who is above the age of 55, things start to take a different turn. Even when some people are attracted to elder men, they have a limit set at a particular age, of say 40 or at most, 50. It was also mentioned that many people who are above the age of 55 or 60, are immediately blocked and shamed for even being on this mobile application. This may probably because of the assumed decline in body efficiency to perform the sexual activity. Desirability thus seems to be hinging on the capacity of the body to engage in sexual activities.

There seems to also be a celebration of young men in the queer community. Yearly Pride walks and other events such as film screenings, parties, and carnivals are generally hosted by rich middle aged men and are attended mostly by the youth of Kolkata. These parties seem to be clustered with young queer men, who give no space to older men who might have wanted to be a part of it.

There is a general belief among many of the younger respondents that apparently old men turn asexual or their sexual needs become replaced with needs of affection and care, and less of a performativity. “Older men anyway are thought of as lonely, without a spouse and since there is no prospect for gay men to marry, it seems to be inevitable for them to lead a lonely life at an old age.” They also believe that same-sex partners may live together but that seems to be a very rare case in Kolkata and my respondents seem to have no idea about it. The three older men, Mr A, B and C were also not in a relationship and most of them had stopped dating after reaching the age of 50. Loneliness seems to be an issue faced by most older gay men, in Kolkata.

However, there was one respondent who actually talked about his relationships with older men and how he thought these men were more caring, understanding, affectionate and even experienced in giving sexual satisfaction to their partners. At the time of the interview, the respondent was not seeing someone, but he reflected upon his past relationships with old men. He told me how he actually preferred men over the age of 60 because he felt more comfortable and safe around them and even had made many friends of that age, who belonged to the queer community. When asked about whether there were indeed more men like him who would be interested in old men and not indulge in ageism, he responded by saying that it is absolutely their choice. There indeed is a majority of people out there who do discriminate against aged men, and even wouldn’t want to talk to them. However, one must not generalise this case.

Facing discrimination is thus not always the case. A respondent aged 26 talked about his relations with aged men. He said how a “sexual escapade” with a 64 year old man had actually changed his views on aged people. He reflected upon how “well-skilled” the man was in the actual act and how interesting the latter was as a person. He believes that older men seem to be more caring and affectionate towards younger men and that is why it makes them more attractive. He also points out how there are people in the community who do like to establish relationships with older men, not just because of their affectionate nature but also their financial position.

Mr A, B and C point out how having a particular financial position becomes important especially to find a partner at their age. Even for casual sexual encounters, there would be many queer men who would only sleep with them if they were provided with money or their dinner or shopping was paid for. However that was not always the case.

Mr. C points out how the queer community in Kolkata seems to have no place for men who are not perceived as “fit” or “physically attractive” in the stereotypical sense, which involves a lot of diet maintenance, exercising and even visiting the gym, which seems to be difficult for aged men to keep up with. His response relates to what Leonard, Duncan and Barrett mentions in their co-written essay, “What a difference a gay makes: The constitution of ‘older gay man’ ” (2013), where they talk about a “commercial, gay culture [that is] ageist and youth obsessed.” It indeed takes a lot of money to attain a gym membership and keep up with a carbohydrate-free diet, along with enhancers of physical beauty and cosmetics. Moreover, they also refer to two important ways in which aged gay men seem to be marginalised:

- Being queer in a world where heterosexuality is the norm and the “normal” kind of living.
- Being old among a community which mainly values the youth.

Aged men have always been tagged as “sexual predators”, “perverts” and have been covertly if not openly shamed within the community for being visible at events. Loneliness seems to be a great trouble for men who have been brave enough to come out of erstwhile heterosexual relations with women and break ties of marriage in order to live “truly”. His response points out to various important facts. At the time of their youth, same-sex attraction wasn’t even talked about. Those being attracted to their own sex was probably perceived by themselves as “unnatural” (according to Mr A) and they had tried to repress themselves. There were many who have entered into marriages and probably even have children and yet do not feel their true selves. Moreover, same-sex relations have been a criminal act till 2018 in India. Thus, same-sex sexual acts were not only treated as a social taboo, but also a criminal offence in India, which made matters worse for the queer community. With the reading down of Section 377 of the constitution, things only seem to have improved. Social demonization of queer people is still a fact. However, there have been a rise in the number of queer people who have accepted themselves and even come out to their peers, if not their parents. At such a juncture, aged queer men do feel safe to come out and explore themselves more, especially with the onset of the age of Internet.

Mr B., on a different note points out his experience of aged men actually being more accepted and respected in the community because of their seniority. His response actually

challenges the stereotypical notions about the aging homosexual who always ends up lonely and sad (Leonard, Duncan and Barrett, 2013). He points out to the friends' communities that queer men form who meet up almost every week at someone's place and cook dinner, play music, watch movies and celebrate solidarity among them. These friends' groups consist of queer people belonging to various ages. An interesting fact that was shared was how such friends would also be accompanying each other to hospitals or for health check-ups since they didn't have anyone to go with. Taking care of each other, asking about whether their friend has taken his medicine on time has been a common practice among this group of men.

Weston (1997) had talked about how queer people have always "chosen" their families in order to survive in a society that seems to not accept their existence. The families that these queer people choose may consist of lovers, ex-lovers, friends and even adopted or biological children. In such families, living as an open queer person seems to be easier, where almost everything is shared amongst the members of the household. A similar reflection of such families that are chosen is found amongst queer men in Kolkata where they seem to choose a family that does not consist of their biological relatives, but friends who belong to the queer community. These friends are always connected and communicate with each other on a daily basis, and are actively involved in providing care to their friends, with whom they share their most personal and intimate part of their lives, that is, their sexual identities.

Another important point upheld was the role played by their women and heterosexual men in their lives. They consist of their cousins, friends, or even neighbours who are very accepting of their sexuality and support them in their lives. Mr B. talked about how he is also a part of this "girl gang", which is basically a group of girls who are like his sisters and they take care of him "like a family member". Engaging in consuming alcohol, food and frequently meeting up are their ways of relating to each other. But most importantly, checking up on each other, accompanying each other to the market or the hospital for health check-ups, cooking food for each other is a regular practice and plays an important role in the lives of these queer aged men. Thus possibilities of alternative family practices also take place with heterosexual people who would then be termed as "friends who are indeed family".

An interesting point was talked about by a respondent, who is 53 years old. He says how a number of his queer male friends are actually married and have children, and yet engage in homosexual activities, in secret. He says how there is a difference drawn between familial life and personal life by these men. This seems to be very prevalent among older queer men in Kolkata. According to the respondents, lot of these men do not identify themselves as queer, and yet engage in homosexual activities outside their marriage. According to the Indian Journal of Medical Research (IJMR), these men could be placed under the category of "MSM" or "men who have sex with men". Historically speaking, these men have been vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV, or Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus due to a lack of knowledge about safe same-sex sexually penetrative activities. The IJMR suggests a "conceptualization of risk from the individual to a wider consideration of psychosocial cultural and interpersonal determinants" would be beneficial for MSMs. They suggest programmes for HIV/AIDS control which would take into consideration

...how societal intolerance enhances risk, requiring combination prevention interventions that use new biomedical interventions aligned with culturally tailored behavioural approaches, and that consider mental health and psychosocial concerns. (Thomas, B., et.al. 2011).

These MSMs actually face a lot of stigma and are discriminated against within the queer community. Questions regarding the “character” of such a person are directed at them since they are believed to be, according to one of my respondents, “cheaters” or “fake gay or bisexual men who simply want to have a lot of sex.” These men are stigmatized against and moral judged for who they are and how they live their lives, which is indeed a form of marginalisation that these men face, within the community.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper comes to reveal the various possibilities that older gay male lives entail in Kolkata. While some men seem to be living their lives in lonesome ways, others have engaged in alternative family practices in order to be at the receiving end of care, love, affection and companionship. However, older gay men in Kolkata become a part of a “buddy system” (Hearn, 1995), in order to connect with other queer people in Kolkata. Their heterosexual friends also play an equally important role in their lives. It must also be said how aged men face discrimination and find it difficult to connect with other queer men in the community because of their age. There probably are some men who probably will never get to be friends with, or come in touch with other queer men. However, such occurrences must not be generalised. There is also a wider acceptance of older men in the queer community in Kolkata and are respected among friend circles consisting of queer people. There are also many individuals who would also want to establish relations with old queer men. Aging does seem to be an alienating process for some queer male individuals where isolation could be forced upon them; however there are possibilities for this process to also be something that brings in freedom and self-expression as they seem to have not much to lose while living their lives on their own terms, depending much upon their friend circles. Hope must be held high for certain ageist notions to undergo change and a wider acceptance of aged men to be perpetrated among the queer community in Kolkata where friendship and intimacy must cease to be dependent upon the physicality or age of the person. Empathy, kindness and open-mindedness must be cultivated for acceptance of the process of aging and the people who go through this process.

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