



My Body is Not Mine

Stories of Violence and Tales of Hope

Voices from the Kothi community in India

Vidya Shah and Aditya Bondyopadhyay
Photographs by Parthiv Shah

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Additional photographs and case studies by
MSM Task Force and INFOSEM partners

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Vidya Shah
Aditya Bondyopadhyay

Foreword

Every male who has sex with another male has the right to be free from violence and harassment, to be treated with dignity and respect, to enjoy all the privileges as full citizens in their country, and to have access to healthcare including those related to HIV and AIDS. Working with Kothis is important on humanitarian grounds, in terms of epidemiological concerns, and from a public health perspective.

The Kothis have constantly faced a denial and lack of understanding amongst the mainstream. This meant that either cases of harassment, violence, and abuse are not addressed at all or are inadequately addressed. Often it provides the violator with impunity. Our attempt has always been to rectify this anomaly and create a better understanding.

“My Body is Not Mine” is an effort to create a public awareness of a community that has largely not been understood or even misunderstood. Adding a visual component to the overall understanding I believe is both an innovative as well as powerful tool both for the community and the audiences the document will reach out to.

NFI believes in a world where all people can live with dignity, social justice and well-being. I am confident that a document such as this will go a long way in creating that understanding amongst the common man and the stakeholder alike. It will not only highlight the life realities of the Kothis, which is often mired in violence and abuse, but also the positive aspects of their existence. I feel certain that this will ultimately lead to creation of a better society where we are enabled in addressing violence, mitigating its impact, and securing for Kothis a better and more fulfilling life.

Shivananda Khan, OBE

CEO

Naz Foundation International

Innovation in the project's approach

In 1990 I had conducted a photo workshop with children of a resettlement colony in the outskirts of Delhi. The results at the end of workshop were fantastic and for the first time I had experienced looking from the “other” eye. Driven by the success of this project I decided to explore the issue of representation further. Two seminal projects followed. When I conceived the photo project on Indian Diaspora in UK, I was keen to find out how the “subject” is presenting itself in the image. In the year 2004, I worked with transgender community giving them cameras. They were interested in opening a window to their lives to the other mainstream communities. They were involved at every stage from deciding what all they would like to show to creating content for the show and editing what to show and what not to in the exhibition and what would be more appropriate for the book. Each image was accompanied by a narrative giving added information to contextualise the picture. They even facilitated putting up of the show in the gallery.

In this project we conducted a workshop with Kothi community in December 2006 in New Delhi. The workshop was planned with participating organizations from several states, with the objectives of making them understand the idea of representation and train them in

photography as a documentation tool. The ultimate aim was to collect, produce, and use photographs taken by partner community based organisation's to be used in the document.

This document contains images which were sent to us from various organisations and photographs taken by me in Lucknow. Working with the group has been simultaneously enjoyable and challenging. Getting a community dealing with identity and violence as an integral part of their life's struggles to view themselves visually, from within was not only challenging for me but definitely more so for them. The Kothi community in this project has unveiled their lives into the public space. I personally believe that this effort is an increased understanding of their lives; it will foster the realisation that the violence they are subjugated to needs to be looked at seriously. This is one of those rare instances where they have modelled, and photographed themselves for a book and exhibition which is meant for a world outside their own.

Parthiv Shah

Introduction

“The study of diversity cannot be to establish any one group as better than another. Its purpose is to establish how unique and wonderful they all are.”

Arundhati Roy

Studying the dynamics of male-to-male sex in India, or even South Asia, is to say the least a very complex journey. Male-to-male sex is a sexual behavior that creates many identities, gender constructs, and communities. This document is an effort to understand one such community, namely that of the Kothis, that supposedly defies the so called normative, but at the end of an analysis will perhaps beckon you to revisit that normative. It is also about our similarities, and our common concern for human rights, about all those things that are right and/or wrong in our systems and that can be corrected with our collective effort. It's about the causes of violence, the manifestations of violence, and the effect that this violence has on the lives of those that it touches and tarnishes. But finally it is also about hope, about fighting



Workshop conducted by NFI and CMAC to train Kothis on documentation methodologies and using photography for this purpose

back for dignity, about creating spaces where one can just be oneself. Effectively, it's about challenging the negative by showing how important and relevant we are to each other in making a better more beautiful world.

South Asia already has one of the highest rates of HIV infection. And to develop appropriate prevention, treatment and care strategies it is important to understand the dynamics of sexuality and sexual behaviors. The moral tendency to write off behaviors as acceptable or unacceptable has only compounded the problem rather than help us work towards effective ways of addressing it.



Documentation workshop designed to address issues of violence, abuse and discrimination faced by Kothis

On the other hand, in the last two decades the debate on sexuality, sexual identity, and gender constructions has gained a new lease and a new significance within the framework of HIV/AIDS and other sexual health prevention and care programs. While these issues relating to it have come up periodically in the past, for instance in the feminist discourse, it is only now, in the growing concern with the right to their lives and to their bodies, of violence faced by marginalised communities, that it has gained a more enduring prominence also within a rights based framework. Understanding and creating greater public dialogue on these issues in a society that fears any questioning of the stereotype to a point that it denies membership to these communities has gained crucial significance.

This growing debate has also necessitated the construction of effective cultural and psycho-social frameworks within which sexual behaviors exist. Issues related to sexuality and sexual identities have for a long time been seen through the lens of a western framework, not suggesting that these frameworks are invalid. However an analysis of these contexts reveals that these usually do not apply to South Asia. The tendency to deny the existence of diverse sexualities within South Asia, both by various Western discourses and discourses of South Asian origin have had a central impact on understanding of South Asian sexualities and gender identities and on the conceptualisation of these identities. The matrix of family, marriage, and reproduction, often operating from a premise of compulsion as

opposed to choice, only succeeds in imposing further limit to the scope of this understanding.

Even though there has been considerable coming together and lobbying amongst the sexual minorities in India, these have often been informed and led by gay and lesbian ideologues and have therefore ignored to some extent the inclusion of transgender communities and networks of gender variant males / Kothis. Perhaps this has to do with the atypicality of their gender identities. Perhaps it is because engaging with such atypicality is discomfiting. Perhaps the non-normative is not a priority. Little has consequently been discussed from their point of view, in terms of the way they live, share

relationships, deal with the incessant violence in their lives and all such.

We hope through this document we can reach out to diverse audiences, create a better understanding and visibility for the Kothi community. With the members of the community through the National MSM and HIV Policy Advocacy and Human Rights Task Force and the INFOSEM members we have explored some of these ideas through their lives, their friendships and families, their interactions, fears, and habits and the violence that they face. This has been a truly a participatory experience with their involvement through workshops, documentation and photography.

Creative Expressions from The Sapphire creation dance workshop, it has choreographed ballets addressing violence faced by Kothis



The Kothi Community







Feminisation which leads to gender based oppressions often result in public interactions like purchasing female accessories, exposing Kothis to the possibility of harassment in public places

The Kothi Community

Kothis

- Are feminised males with a feminine demeanor and identification with the stereotype of 'woman'.
- Adopt a feminine identity that is often an amplification of what women are and therefore enacted in ways that are often boisterous and loud.
- Have extremely visible presence in a shame based world that values invisibility.

Most male-to-male sexual relationships in South Asia are based on gendered self-identities and sex roles. The most visible of these male-to-male sex frameworks involve feminised males who identify themselves as Kothis, a term used across Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The Kothi is a feminine homosexual identity quite different from the gay and bisexual identity defined in the western context. Very much a sub-culture in South Asia, Kothis belong largely to lower-middle class families and are excluded from the mainstream due to lack of education, employment, socio-economic status all of which gets further deepened due to their “different” gender identity and sexual behavior. Their partners, who generally sexually penetrate them, are males who are referred to as giryas or panthis meaning “real men”. In sexual health terminology a Kothi would be the passive partner, willing to be sexually penetrated by the Panthi. Unlike the Kothis the Panthi is the man, is invisible in the masculine mainstream, and so gets less targeted by society and the state at large. Males who are penetrated are usually perceived to be “not-men”.

This kind of labeling plays a role in defining power dynamic in the relationship - enabling the penetrating males to consider themselves superior to the penetrated. For self-identified Kothis then, the distinction between themselves and their male partners is based on gender identity and not sexual identity. Kothis identify more with females. The need or want to be identified as the feminine, gets expressed through make-up, women's clothes, cooking, dancing and so on. This perception of the self as the feminine is central to the Kothi identity. This however also expose Kothis to all the gender based violence that is prevalent in our primarily patriarchist society.

That this gendered identity framework of male-to-male sex is mainly common among low-income populations could be because gender variant males from economically better off sections of society usually identify with the more westernized 'gay' identity, i.e. they belong to another category of men who have sex with men (MSM) who are usually English-speaking, middle



Lack of education restricts employment opportunities, often forcing Kothis into sex work. Sex work, however, can be inherently disempowering and violent

and upper class, and who identify themselves as gay. Then there are Hijras, biological males who cross-dress regularly and sometime undergo ritualistic castration and emasculation. They are a socio-religious community with it's own rules and regulations. Both Kothis and Hijras draw their sexual partners from the general male population. One may therefore think that the Kothi identity appears close to that of the transgender or the Hijra community, but a significant difference is that where the Hijras settle into a gender role and live within their specific communes, for a Kothi this keeps vacillating between the male and the female roles given the societal pressures and expectations. Also most Kothis live with their families.

There are some basic biological differences between female and male bodies, often linked to their different roles in reproduction. But beyond these differences, many societies define different roles, rights and responsibilities for males and females, which often gets crystallised as stereotypes. Gender is a term used to refer to these socially defined differences between males and females. Gender differences are based on widely shared beliefs and norms within a society or culture about male and female characteristics. These beliefs and norms about gender often create oppositional hierarchies and inequalities between males and females.

Finally, there are men and boys who approach other males to relieve their sexual urge (referred to as “reducing body heat”) and may include friends having sex with friends for mutual pleasure and males in all-male institutions such as boarding



The Kothi community extends to all age groups & reports of violence & abuse is reflected in the tales from this entire age range

schools, the army, and some established religious and political all male groupings.

In the South Asian context many who could be categorised as MSM would not define themselves as such because they perceive themselves as normative penetrative males, or as penetrated “not-men”. Categorisation is further complicated by the traditional demand that every man marries a woman. Many MSM, of whatever gender identification or sexual orientation, are either married or planning to marry, and this includes even Kothis. They have concurrent relationships with men and women at the same time, increasing the risk of infection and acting as a bridge population for the spread of HIV.

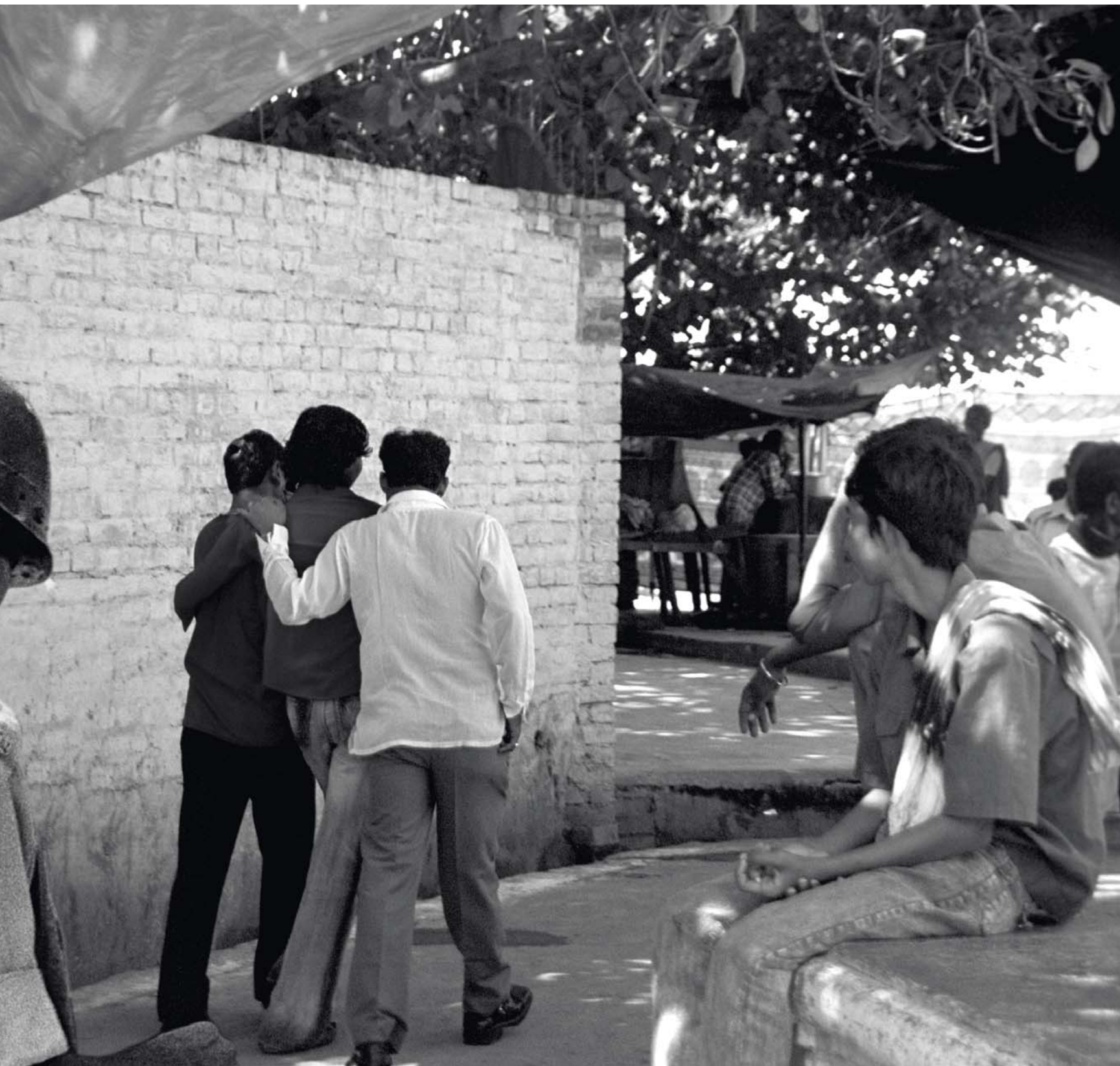
There is a considerable lack of understanding of this community that defies gender and biological roles. It is therefore important that we address the issues faced by the community, the anguish and the trauma in the invisibility that society largely wants to ascribe to their behaviors and identity, and understand their culture as well their persistent struggles.



Services addressing victims of violence often have to be taken to the person through on-site counselling by trained peer networks



Both sex work and outreach are targeted by the police with extortions, demands for sexual favours, and refusal often results in violence and false charges







Sexual assault and rape is often gender based, even when the perpetrators, as in the above case from Lucknow, are Hijras or Kothis themselves, often leaving lasting psychological and physical scars



Physical appearance like a limp waist or mannerism of walking often identifies a Kothi in a public space attracting harassment and physical violence



Fear of abuse in public often compel Kothis to seek out secluded spaces







Public areas like parks accessed by Kothis for cruising, are also places frequented by goondas & policemen, who extort money, sexual favours



Harassment in school & other educational institutions often compel Kothis to leave their studies midway; they are usually forced to take work in beauty & massage parlours; massage parlours often also become spaces for sex work



Often when a Kothi has to purchase feminine attire for herself from the market, it attracts ridicule and also mark them in public for future harassment

Gender in the Identity





Gender in the Identity

Sexuality has generally been discussed and analysed as a significant category for social analysis in the context normative heterosexuality. To be able to understand this “sexual other” it is important to decode ways in which heterosexuality determines and structures everyday life. It also leads us to acknowledge the importance of recognising this impact that the understanding of heterosexuality has had on the development of social theory. It has come to be the point from which we largely think of social relations. Also it is not seen as an individual preference, something that we are born as or gradually develop into, but as socially constructed institutions which structures and maintains male domination, in particular through the way in which it establishes the sanctions to marriage and lineage.¹

In South Asian cultures, marriage is obligatory, irrespective of personal preference and choice. The vast majority of marriages are arranged between two families. Whereas the usual marriage age of males in India and Bangladesh about 25 years, many Kothi-identified males try and delay their marriage as long as possible and will often marry later. In a seminal study conducted by NFI with Kothis in India and Bangladesh 34% of respondents were married. This does not reflect marriage as a choice, but

the fact that the majority of respondents had managed to avoid marriage so far. 39% respondents who were married stated that their wives knew that they had sex with other men, but claimed that their wives accepted it, or were incapable of doing anything about it. It needs to be recognised that to divorce is highly stigmatising for the woman, and often leads to ostracisation.²



Dancing, considered non-masculine, is a common interest and passion for most Kothis

¹Richardson Diane: *Theorising Heterosexuality in Rethinking Sexuality*, Sage Publications, India, 2000

²Bondyopadhyay Aditya and Khan Sivananda: *From the Frontline*; Study conducted by the Naz Foundation International,2004; available on www.nfi.net



The framework of relationship follows a conventional heterosexual model of a husband and a wife

Dasu is 30 years old and was forced into marrying following family pressures and a failed relationship with another Panthi. For four years he looked after the children of the widowed Panthi and was then deserted by this man. In depression he even attempted suicide. Subsequently his family forced him to marry and till today he is unable to relate with his wife, particularly sexually. He is a teacher in a school and feels he has to be responsible and own up to societal expectations and pressures. Dasu is unhappy with his life's situation but finds himself in a position where he can blame no one. This is reflective of the constant 'non-physical' but lingering psychological violence with which many Kothis have to live their life.

(From Sahara Trust, Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh)

To comprehend same sex desire the common presumption is that this kind of desire is related or linked to certain types of people viz. that there are heterosexual people but there are also some homosexual people. "Such a response leaves unquestioned heterosexuality as the norm i.e. the faith that most of us are heterosexual, but then there are others out there who are gay, lesbian, transsexual or transgender."³ While this applies to urban centres where we are talking of a strong gay and lesbian movement, the larger reality is even more complex in the Indian context. The Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual categories become more confused and layered in the semi-urban or rural Indian or even the South Asian context. Masti is a term used for same-sex behaviour between

boys and men, in suburban and rural India. Men do have sex with each other. But it is not considered sex; it is just something you do in fun and play. People then get married and may continue to have masti later on.⁴

Male-to-male sex and sexualities in India, to a large extent, do not "fit" the heterosexual/homosexual oppositional paradigm that is so commonly used as a discourse to discuss same-sex behaviors in the west. Rather, the primary pattern appears to be that of a gendered framework, with specific orientations and sex roles. This framework reasserts a belief in a "man"/not-"man" duality, where the "man" perceives himself as a normative male from the

What are the typical expectations of men in this South Asian Cultural context?

- Defining masculinity as sexual domination over women
- Inculcating the belief in men that they must take risks particularly sexual ones, including having regular sex with multiple partners
- Pressuring men through cultural values to "perform". Men are reluctant to seek help, information or treatment if they suffer from sexual problems or sexually transmitted diseases as it would mean "admitting ignorance" and "showing vulnerability"
- Reaffirming strongly held beliefs on masculinity that dissuade men from seeking help after contracting HIV or AIDS, which jeopardises both their own and their partner's health

³ Menon Nivedita: Sexuality in India: Critical Concerns; Voices for Change; Journal on Communication for Development April 1999 3 (1) p.4-8 SNTD Mumbai, India

⁴ Khanna Akshay : Sexuality and Identity: Heteronormativity and Censorship, www.delhifilmarchive.org

general male society, while the not-“man” perceives himself as a feminised male, self-identifying as a Kothi. In fact in the MSM context penetrated versus penetrative sex differentiates one's sexual identity as male versus not male. Thus Kothi-identified males are doubly stigmatised because as biological males, they express a feminised identity and because of sexual practice they are penetrated. They do not perceive themselves, nor are they perceived, as “men”.

How is this conflict/contradiction or paradox justified? Sexuality is usually viewed in the context of gender and power. Gender and power vis-à-vis what? Within the framework of institutions, be it political, social, or cultural. So in effect heterosexuality is the main domain within which masculinity gets defined. One element of treating this masculinity as a symbol of power is also the nonchalance with which the sexual experience is perceived.

Most importantly in the Kothi context, a biological male who is penetrated, becomes 'not man enough'; therefore 'less than a man'; therefore 'like a woman'; for 'real men', such penetrated men can be targeted with all the abuse and violence that a hetero-patriarchist society reserves for it's women. The reverse is also true where the penetrated man does not perceive himself as a man, and internalises a stereotypical, often highly caricaturised image of the woman, and looks upon victimisation and/or violence as an integral part of existence. The 'man' is the 'man'; he is having sex with someone who's not



Parents are ashamed to expose feminised boys to the world at large, taking them out of schools and forcing them into household work

a man. He by 'penetrating' is doing what men are supposed to do. He is therefore not a homosexual. The '(wo)man' is the '(wo)man'. He is having sex with a 'man'. He is getting penetrated just like women. He too is therefore not a homosexual. Same sex relationship therefore actually plays out in a heterosexual model. The “relationship of equals” idealised in the 'gay' model does not exist in the vast majority of same sex attracted persons.

“When 18 year old Gunaseelam decided to come out as a Kothi, his family and friends made him an object of his ridicule. Calling him names such as “Vadi” and “Podi” (slang in Tamil for come and go for women) His parents noticed this and began abusing him and ill-treated him, to the extent of poisoning his food. Gunaseelam was scared, angry and decided to seek support from an MSM network Snegyitham.”

(From Snegyitham, Tamil Nadu)

In other words, gender identification, defined by actions specifically ascribed to that gender are reinforced and becomes the defining self identification, while the notion of sexuality and the fact that sexual desire can also be the basis of creation of an identity is totally subverted.

It is therefore understandable that the gay identity, which is closely linked to egalitarian relationship between 'men' does not find a very strong footing in India. Identity for a vast number of same sex attracted Indians depend not on their (homo)sexuality but on their gender



Right from their childhood Kothis are very comfortable doing household chores defying the typical gender expectations of “normal” boys that age



An expression of intimacy in public is an invitation to being targeted for violence and harassment

perception, gender identification, gender orientation, and gender role play in the sex act. The men are men, they do not need any other identity, no matter how or with who they have sex. They can dissolve into the mainstream and are therefore hard to reach, making things like HIV intervention with them more difficult. As long as they are not found out they do not risk being shamed. They can therefore abjure their sexuality and continue without any guilt associated with sexual actions. They can also be

agents of violence as they are not faced with either internalised guilt or with external consequences.

The (wo)men as explained above adopt many different gender based identities like 'Hijras' and 'Kothis', and also ascribe identities to their 'men/husbands/partners' like 'Giriayas' and 'Panthis'. It is important to keep in mind that these later identities are not the self perceptions of the 'men' but what is used by the (wo)men to describe them. Gendered identification of the penetrated





men can have many peculiarities specific to these identities, namely being feminine in demeanor and identification with the stereotype of 'woman'. The adoption of the feminine identity is often an amplification of what women are and therefore enacted in ways that are often boisterous and loud, often a caricature of the traditional female. But more importantly for our discourse on violence, it is important to keep in mind that

this behaviour is extremely visible in a shame based world that values invisibility. It's almost an invitation to violence.

Same sex attractions: Childhood⁵

A common question that recurs in this context is where does this begin? The origins of these feelings and their meanings are difficult to discern because children are seldom asked if they have sexual attractions for other boys and girls. Although these later dislocations may be distorted by an awareness of current sexual identity, they provide an invaluable source of information.

The usual framework that one refers to is whether boys and girls adhere to the norm, to the cultural definitions of gender - how a boy should act, not act and feel. So it is inappropriate for boys to play with girl-type toys, especially dolls; involvement in girl-type activities and games; sex role-motor behavior including limp wrists, high pitched voice and dramatic gestures; stated interests such as wanting to be a girl, imagining self as dancer or model, preferring female friends and being around older women.

"I never understood my attraction to men and boys; I cursed myself for being like this and in fact thought I was a sinner"
(Subodh, Mitr Trust, New Delhi)

As a consequence of spending considerable time alone and appreciating female activities, the

⁵ Ritch C.Savin Williams : Memories of Same Sex Childhood in 'And then I Became Gay'; Routledge, New York and Britain, 1998



Often effeminacy is itself a cause for attracting violence; Meera (name changed) was brutally attacked while he was walking down the harbour area of Cochin



harassment from the peers can begin early on. This usually comes from boys but sometimes girls, teachers, parents, and siblings also join the mocking. Boys get teased particularly by their male peers for feminine gross and fine motor behavior. The hand gestures, standing and sitting postures, leg and hip movement, voice pitch and cadence, and head tilt conveyed to the others that these boys were girl like and hence weak and deplorable. The reactions from peers can go well beyond the teasing which most youths receive during childhood and adolescence as a means of social bonding, to outright verbal and physical abuse, and sometimes even sexual abuse, all of which can be harassing and sometimes extremely destructive to a sense of self. The abuse is occasionally physically expressed and always has emotional and self destructive consequences.



Even daily activities by effeminate males attract unwanted attention



“Manish Mali liked to play with dolls and do household chores from a very early age. When he was 5 years old he began to realize that he was different from other boys. He was more comfortable being with women rather than with men and boys. His paternal uncle disliked his feminine behavior and used to beat him

up regularly. His first sexual experience was with his teacher in school. When other boys got to know of this liaison they tried blackmailing him into having sex with them and eventually, in grade seven he left school and never got back to studying.”

(Lakshya Trust, Gujarat)



This is another picture of Meera from Cochin



What is the consequence of this gender atypicality?

The result is often a lack of self-worth and self-esteem. Many Kothis not only face harassment, sexual violence and rape from law enforcement agents, as do often the staff from projects providing HIV prevention services, but also from those whom they have called friends in schools, colleges and work places, along with those in positions of trust, such as relatives, neighbourhood elders, elder friends, and teachers. Since their

behavior does not conform to the masculinities demanded of the “Asli Mard” (or the real man) in society, they get stigmatized by family members as “not being man enough”, bringing shame to the family and hence fit to be ridiculed.

“Kamlesh has seen abuse and discrimination from his family members when he was only nine years old. His family includes his parents, and an elder brother who is married and stays with his wife. He rarely mingles with the rest of the family. His effeminate behavior often leads to his being ridiculed and forbidden to connect with the outside world. He ended up doing all the housework and forgoing his education”.
(Lakshya Trust, Gujarat)

Not only does poverty, class, and educational level stigmatise individuals, along with the fact of HIV infection, but also the specific gendered roles and self-identity that some MSM align with. Thus kothi-identified males are doubly stigmatized because as biological males, they express a feminised identity and in sexual practice they are penetrated. They do not perceive themselves, nor are they perceived, as “men”. Their feminisation, the crossing of gender roles and barriers that are accepted as social norms, reinforces their stigmatisation, leading to exclusion and harassment.

A low self-esteem, disempowerment, and marginalisation that lead to further abuse,



Kothis in sex work do not have the power to negotiate or refuse and this often makes them vulnerable to violence



Although not respected, Kothis are often invited for performances, which is a much needed source of income; however performing Kothis are also expected to provide sexual services



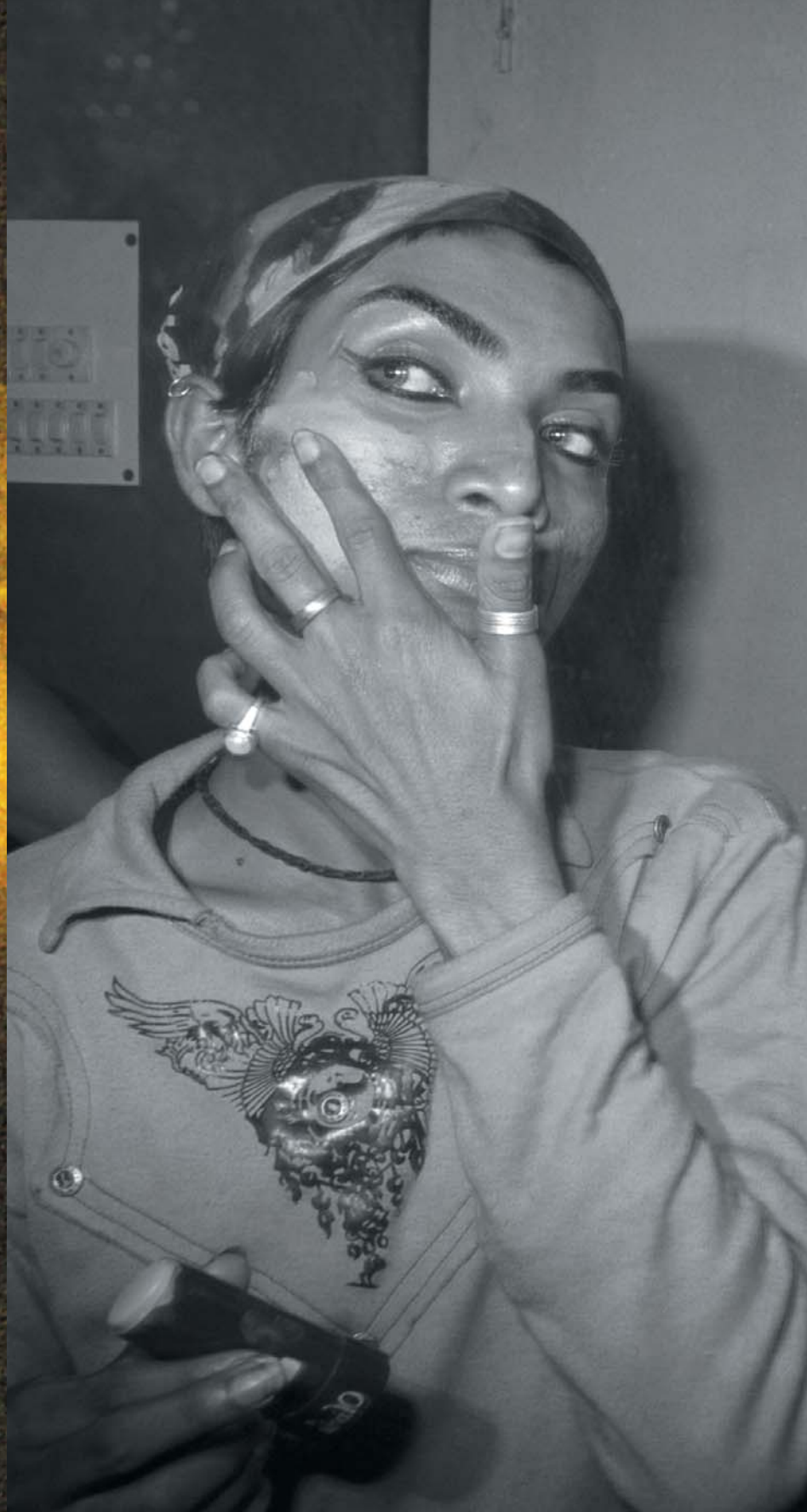
Living together with partners is rare amongst Kothis

violence and social exclusion, become a vicious cycle. On the other hand, the “manly”, more masculine partners of kothi-identified males easily merge into the general normative male society, their sense of masculinity maintained because they are the penetrators, not of other “men”, but of “not-men”.

Because such feminised males do not live up to the expected normative standards of masculine behavior, this leads to the notion that being feminised somehow

weakens the person, a notion that is often internalised by Kothis themselves. Accepted notions around effeminacy are therefore one of the major factors that lead to disempowerment and opens feminised males to abuse and violence and to a denial of service provision. How do these notions of “acceptable” masculinity get defined and in a sense enforced? We explore some of these questions in the next chapter.

Masculinities









Social Constructions of Masculinities and Sexualities

W edded as lives are to the fabric of society, any exploration of masculinities and sexualities must begin with an understanding of the social context and situations where such masculinities are nurtured and reinforced. Any notion in society, including such elusive ones as one's notion of self, often has profound impact on the way one constructs and conducts one's actions. In the case of masculinities in India, this may mean the way one identifies oneself as a sexual being, act out one's sexual roles and responsibilities, create stereotypes that determine one's character, or instill notions of shame, honour, or power, that determines one's violence.

Societies have always tried to create the idealised 'good person', who lived in the 'good society', living his life by a set of standards that can be called 'good conduct'. It can also be described as an attempt to create an idealised uniformity that irons over differences in society. In reality however, each group of humanity, howsoever defined or categorised, is as different from any other group, as are the individuals within the group. Historically it was thought that violence would be eliminated if such uniformity can be achieved and enforced. Actually however human beings have continued to be different from each other and all attempts at creating such universally accepted uniform standards have not succeeded. Attempt to achieve this uniformity has however often been by violent means.



Today many Kothis out in the public claiming their rights; Anjali-Miss SAHODARAN 2006 and Malaika-Miss SAHODARAN 2007 at Chennai

Therefore those that wield power have constantly tried to reinforce the ideal of uniformity by use of all the tools available to them, often in violent ways. The same is the case with masculinities as they have evolved in the Indian context. There is a set ideal of the man, which may be chimera, but it takes on very real characteristics in the psychological geography of the collective male. Any one that is born with the male anatomy is expected to be regimented into and towards this ideal; anyone who does not conform, or worse still actually rebels against this ideal can be, and often is, violated by violence. Kothis are therefore an apt target under this scheme.

Indian society is not an individualistic society. Every one is born with many identities that are

predetermined and that one can do very little to change. These identities of family, caste, language, religion, race, region, ethnicity, colour, and economic standing have all their own sets of standards and one is expected to conform to all of these standards as one negotiates one's life. The casualty of this collective imposition of identities is the individuality of the person, since the space where such individuality can play out thus gets severely restricted.

Indian society is also governed by notions of shame. Any action that violates the rules of the collective standard that is imposed by any one of the many identities of the individual is perceived to bring shame, not just on the individual but also on the collective grouping

that the individual is supposed to belong to. The clannish nature of society constantly contrives to subsume overt individual expressions.

It does not however mean that individuals do not act in individualistic ways. They do. Societies, where shame is the biggest opprobrium, does allow individuals to act in any manner that they want, as long as their actions are not overt enough to challenge the set standards by which society is supposed to conduct itself. In effect it can be called a hypocritical society. One is free to do what ever one wants to do as long as no one finds out.

Another aspect of this emphasis on shame and the focus being away from the individual is the lack of the notion of guilt. If it is alright to do anything as long as one takes necessary care to ensure that no one finds out, then the ethical considerations of ones actions becomes unnecessary. While guilt [as opposed to shame] is a very individual feeling, where the ethical considerations are of the individual and his actions, it's absence means that a person does not develop the psychological framework to be responsible, and therefore can and often does act with impunity.



Winners of Miss SAHODARAN 2007 at Chennai, a public program that created visibility

In other words an individual does not have to justify one's action to anyone, including to one's own self. All that the person has to do is to ensure that he does not speak about his actions, and that nobody comes to know of it. A necessary consequence of this is a conspiracy of silence that works in two different ways to reinforce violence. The victim keeps silent because of the shame associated with being violated. The violator utilises this same silence to enhance his impunity and acts without fear of any consequence. The violator also does not consider his actions to be ethically misplaced in any way since the individual responsibility of one's actions are never internalised.

In the sphere of sex and sexuality, this implies that one can have as much sex as one wants, with as many persons as one wants, of any type as one wants be it heterosexual or homosexual, as long as the veil of silence is maintained. The action of having sex is devoid of notions of consequences as long as the silence surrounding it is intact.

The result is that most people grow up without developing their sexuality, their sex lives revolve only around the act of having sex. Sexuality, which is the sexual definition of the self does not find a playground when every notion of the individualistic expression is socially subverted to the notions of the collectives that one identifies with.

This resultant emphasis on the act means that identities are defined by actions. Patriarchy



Domestic violence amongst cohabiting partners, often invisible, is a reality for Kothis

which is the ruling power wielder in constructing Indian society, takes this to the next level where actions or activities of the man and woman are crystallised to the extent of stereotyping them. In the sphere of sex, specific acts are abrogated and/or allocated to the man, and other specific



In a domestic situation the role of caregiver is usually that of the Kothi

acts are allocated to the woman, with both expected to confine themselves to these acts alone, any deviation from which brings shame, and often violent consequences.

This stereotyping often defines and describes the manner in which same sex desires is played out. The stereotype of the man, which defines the notions of masculinity, is extended to sexual acts and roles. This stereotypification ascribes the role of 'penetrating' to the man in the sexual act, and counter-logically the role of 'being penetrated' to the woman in the sexual act. The emphasis on penetration, on which sexual self identifications

and notions of masculinity and gender turns, has not been overcome by most of the same sex desiring persons in India.

Therefore the vast number of people who desire and have sex with their same sex either think of themselves as 'MEN' and do what men do in the sexual act, namely penetrate; or as 'WOMEN' and do what women do, namely be penetrated. The opposite is also true in constructing the self definition and identity, where the desire to be penetrated in the sexual act often translate into defining the self as womanly or feminine. Once this identification is established, it leads to



adoption of all the other social stereotypes that women are supposed to imbibe or adopt, thereby initiating a process of overt feminisation that is extremely visible.

The cultural and social disempowerment of women in a hetero-patriarchist society is therefore also adopted and reinforced. This has various violent consequences that have been described in greater details in the other chapters and in the succeeding chapter on violence. What is of consequence here is the fact that a biological male who is penetrated, becomes 'not man enough'; therefore 'less than a man'; therefore

'like a woman'; and for 'real men', such penetrated men can be targeted with all the abuse and violence that a hetero-patriarchist society reserves for its women folks.

The reverse is also true where the penetrated male does not perceive himself as a man, and internalises a stereotypical, often highly caricatured image of the woman, and looks upon victimisation and/or violence as his 'station in life'.

Same sex relationships therefore often play out in a heterosexual model. It is characterised by

the role play of the participants where one acts out the role of the more powerful man and the other the role of the less powerful woman. The sex acts also follow the stereotypical notions of what the specific roles of the man and woman are supposed to be. The penetrator-

penetrated dichotomy is maintained at all levels of the relationship and this in turn defines the power dynamic of the relationship. It is emphatically not a relationship of equals, and is therefore open to violence on the disempowered.

There is a close relationship between performances, middlemen, sex-work, and sexual violence





Medical establishments often refuse services to Kothis; Madhu was not only refused admission in an Ernakulam government hospital, he was assaulted and seriously wounded by the security staff there



Bloodstained clothes of Madhu after he was attacked







For many Kothis, femininity reduces opportunities and confines them to some cliched roles and professions







Pressure to marry means many Kothis live dual lives, having children and grand children

Violence in the context of masculinities









On November 14, 2006, Farah was busy distributing condoms. Some 'Giriyas' of Farah's Hijra guru approached him. They started altercation and threatened him for serious consequences. Then one of the men forcibly snatched his mobile and drove away.

When Farha was returning home, the men came and made him an offer- if he takes them out for a drink, they will return his mobile. Initially Farha resisted, but they persisted in a threatening tone. So he had to go with them. They bought the liquor from the shop and went to kuriya ghat. After drinking, three men raped Farha one by one in the hut nearby which was empty.

During the rape, Farha pleaded them helplessly to leave him. The fourth person in this group felt pity for him and refused to rape him. But rest of the three men beat him up and threatened him not to tell the incident to anyone."

(From Bharosa Trust, Lucknow)



Protest by Kothi Groups against the murder of Sudha in Trichy, Tamil Nadu

*“On 29/10/06, M.K.Madhu, (an HIV Positive Kothi) was attacked by a security staff of General Hospital, Eranakulam. The security staff abused Madhu. He got provoked and pushed the guard. In response, the security staff took a piece of rubble and hit on the forehead of Madhu severely. He bled profusely. Two Police men who reached the spot admitted Madhu in General Hospital, Eranakulam. There were 6 stitches on his forehead. Madhu told the Police, doctors and nurses that he was HIV positive. He was subsequently quarantined”
(From Anusooya, Kerala)*

“It was late in the evening when Rocky (male sex worker) was returning to his room after a day of shopping as he had to go to his home town for a festival of Dashera by the train of 27th September 2006. He waited at a bus stop from where he comes often for work - which means to get costumers. That day he had no intentions of work as he was too tired from his day schedule. As he was waiting two police men came and caught him and took him to the police chowki.

Here they started hitting him without telling or saying anything to him. Later they asked him to take out a cell phone, a gold chain and rupees 30000/- which they said he has stolen from the spot where he was arrested. When Rocky said he has no idea what they were talking about, the police said, “we know you have done nothing but we can always arrest you by putting false allegations, so it will be better for you to call up all of your friends who are into same trade.

They kept harassing Rocky and four police men took turns and raped him all night. He was released early morning of 20th September 2006 at 7.30 a.m. without any report or charges filed against him in

chowki. He was forced to give them a written statement on a blank paper that he is a homosexual man and he needs a chance to improve himself and will be never found again doing homosex.”

(From Mitr, New Delhi)



Poverty compels some Kothis into hard manual labour; to protect themselves they have to hide their sexual and gender orientation

The above incidences show that sexual aggression is a form of violence that is adopted by males on the feminised. Even when the agent of instigation is a Hijra guru, a transgendered person himself, he adopts this form of violence as this reinstates he patriarchist notions of the station of men and women and therefore also further disempowers the violated. These case studies documented by the different groups are merely indicative of the different kinds of violence that the Kothis face from state as well as society. The violence is faced literally on a day to day basis can be gruesome, traumatic and in cases also been fatal. What may seem as unthinkable, non-acceptable within the mainstream heterosexist order, is a reality by way of the family, law, peers and even media. The abuse at the hands of the police includes rape (often gang rape), extortion, blackmail, beatings, extra-judicial killing, imprisonment (often on false charge), harassment in public cruising areas are common. The judiciary has in many instances been insensitive and culturally not adept at understanding the gravity of this, so cases seldom proceed to conviction.

The source of the violence is manifold. It is effeminacy and not the factual knowledge of male-to-male sexual behavior that is a precursor to abuse. Because such feminised males do not live up to the expected normative standards of masculine behavior, this leads to the notion that those who are feminised can be exploited and abused, that being feminised somehow weakens the person, a notion that is often internalized by Kothis themselves¹. The outright prejudice against the community, their presumed



Kothis are often the primary care givers to the aged in the family

“deviant” sexuality and a gender identity that transgresses the male-female categories becomes evident in such incidents. What may appear to be a freak incident actually carries with it a much larger cultural, social and political significance.

In the Frontline study by NFI, in terms of harassment, abuse and violence:

42% of respondents reported that they had been sexually assaulted or raped.



All public cruising areas are within the radars of the police

60% of these reported sexual assault or rape by goonda.

75% of respondents who reported being sexually assaulted or raped by either policemen or goondas, stated that they thought this occurred because they were effeminate.

70% of respondents reported facing harassment from police, ranging from extortion, blackmail, beatings, restrictions to movement, and disclosure of sexual practices to goondas and their family members.

As discussed elsewhere in the document, shame is often dealt with by 'regaining honor', which can be manifested in act like 'honor killing' or severe violence against the one that brings dishonor. Kothis and Hijras satisfy all the cultural reasons of shaming the family. The culture therefore opens them to abuse and violence and sanctions the same.

In other words, social justice and human rights issues for MSM are a complex matrix of concerns and needs that reflect personal psycho-sexual histories, economics, gendered roles, socio-



Demonstrations in Pondicherry, and a meeting with the Chief Minister, to protest the denial of admission in the government hospital to a HIV positive Kothi

cultural beliefs and norms, as well as legal policies and social policing that create a context for MSM - particularly for feminised males - of low self-esteem, disempowerment, and marginalisation that lead to further abuse, violence and social exclusion, in a vicious cycle. The stigmatisation and social exclusion further disempowers feminised males educationally and economically,

increasing their poverty, which often forces them into sex work.

Often it is effeminacy and not the factual knowledge of male-to-male sexual behaviour that is a precursor to abuse. Because such feminised males do not live up to the expected normative standards of masculine behaviour, this

Kothi/Hijra Identity and violence/abuse: the Social Sanctions:

- The male child is very important in a patriarchist society.
- A male child who does not perform the duties of marriage and procreation is looked down upon.
- A male child that does not 'protect his masculinity' and gets penetrated is a shame to the family/clan
- The shame is amplified if the male child is visibly unmanly

leads to the notion that those who are feminised can be exploited and abused. Resistance against this violence is often non-existent, as Kothis having internalised these notions, also accept violence as normative.

The understanding that anyone feminised is available for sex is often manifested in a demand for sex by the police or by goondas. In school and other educational institutions this leads to sexual assault or targeted sexual harassment from peers and seniors. Teachers often are also agents of violence. With the police, this demand is often

translated as a demand for sex in lieu of extortion money at cruising areas. This is especially true with the police attitude towards male sex workers.

Often collusion between local goondas in public areas and beat constable impede MSM from filing complaints or seeking justice. Approaching a police post or station often exposes the MSM to the risk of sexual abuse. Goondas are often acting vicariously for the police and sharing their 'intake' with them.



A banner demanding the right to life and dignity for Kothis in a public demonstration in Kolkata



Feminised males often have to face economic and educational consequences of their femininity. Often advancement in education and by extension economic standing is impeded due to harassment and discrimination. Educational institutions often target feminised males with harassment and violence, including sexual violence, which impeded their education, and thereby restricting employment opportunities. More than half of the respondents in the NFI study stated that fellow students or teachers had harassed them in school or college because they were effeminate. They reveal that often they have not been able to carry on with their education due to this harassment, and this has

impacted on their employability at a later date. Interestingly, those that reached a higher stage of their education reported a greater degree of harassment than at lower levels. This is because, at higher education levels, their manifestation of femininity is more pronounced, and they therefore suffer more abuse from others.

The economic impact of this lack of education is employability. Many Kothis end up in sex work as a means of livelihood. Sex work can be full time sex work, or part time sex work. Sex work itself often leads to abusive and violent situations, with clients, pimps, goondas, and police. More importantly in the context of HIV, sex work was

often conducted in a space that is controlled by either the client or a pimp, and the interviewees had very little negotiating power within this space, especially for safer sex options. Negotiation power, to whatever extent it exists, usually only extended to the determination of the economic cost for the sex, not to safer sex options.

Many Kothis face discrimination within the family based on their femininity and this is often translated into long term and deep seated psychological problems, like low self esteem, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Many Kothis report sexual abuse within their family often from powerful male members, often uncles and/or elder cousins. The family when it becomes aware of such abuse (which was rare), usually reacted with a sense of shame, and attempted to cover up the incident, rather than to protect the abused and punish the perpetrator.

It is important to note that in clannish societies, often the society as a whole acts 'vicariously' for



Sudha



A photo of Sudha, taken with a cellphone camera, murdered in Trichy



While some families are accepting and affectionate...

the family/clan to regain lost honor. This often means that the society in general and not just the family/clan target Kothis and Hijras with abuse and violence, and such targeted violence is often unprovoked. The police and the constabulary, often adopt the mantle of these

social keepers of honors, and takes on this role of moral policing. Research shows that they constantly violate the basic human and constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights of same sex attracted persons, mostly the most visible Kothis and Hijras. We see examples of this pattern across India.



...the sexual and intimate lives of Kothis still have to be lived outside of the family



Travelling in public transport is often harassive



Forcing many Kothis into domestic work



Many Kothis take recourse to religion to deal with the trauma of violence in their lives



The 'Frontline' study by NFI shows:

42% of respondents reported that they had been sexually assaulted or raped

60% of these reported sexual assault or rape by goondas

75%

of respondents who reported being sexually assaulted or raped by either

policemen

or goondas, stated that they thought this occurred because they were effeminate.

70%

of respondents reported facing harassment from police, ranging from

extortion, blackmail, beatings,

restrictions to movement, and disclosure of sexual practices to goondas and their family members



Often taking recourse in unconventional professions, even sex work



HIV prevention work with NGOs have opened a new field of employment to Kothis

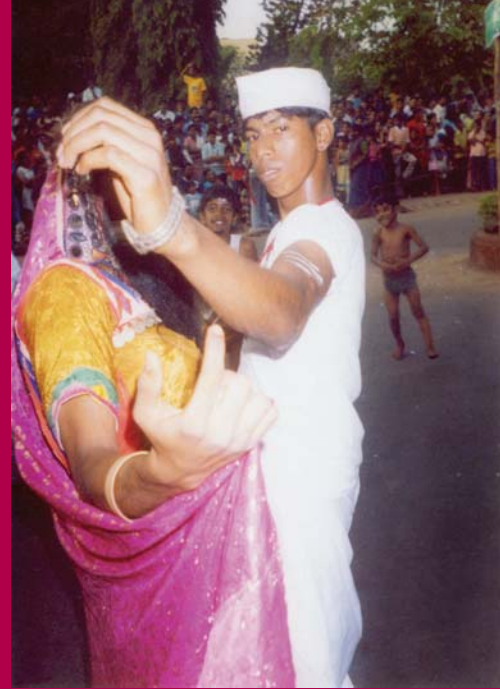




Families often force Kothis to do the most menial or laborious jobs



*Even educated
Kothis find it hard
to get employment*



Men often consider it their masculine privilege to harass Kothis



Today many Kothis out in the public claiming their rights; The Carnival in Goa, the Kolkata Pride March, and the Miss Sahodaran contests are opportunities for this

End Note



We have heard the stories of violence; we have heard the conditions in which the lives of Kothis are led. But is everything just bleak? We think not. There is hope and it is this hope that lead us to this end note. The Kothi stories of struggle and survival have come a long way. These stories have themselves played a crucial role in paving the way forward. Denial, ignorance, illegality, myths, fears, violence, abuse, exclusion, invisibility have taken centre stage in current discourses on MSM issues.

The violence is real. For a long time the violence was not addressed due to social factors already discussed in this book, but that is changing now. Kothis are one of the communities most at risk from HIV and AIDS. A rights-based approach is absolutely crucial in addressing HIV amongst MSM in general and Kothis in particular. Ensuring equal access for all to health, and freedom from a life wrought with violence that is perpetuated by both the society and the State, is crucial to meeting the challenge of HIV. The response to the HIV epidemic has shown us that the only effective way of dealing with the spread of the epidemic is by empowering those that are the most disempowered, so that they can make the rational decisions to change their behaviour to safer practices, and have the ability to sustain this change.

This hopefully leads to what is called an enabling environment. This realisation has encouraged an overt effort to first form Kothi groups and networks that take on the work of HIV prevention interventions amongst their peers, and second to address the social, legal, and cultural factors that create a situation of violence around them. There is an increasing realisation that Sexual identities are central to our very existence, our creative, cultural political and social spaces and importantly to our fundamental right to life, liberty, dignity, and to freedom of expression. HIV also for the first time made resources and funds available to Kothi groups and networks to organise.

Through this organising by forming CBOs, collectives and networks; by liaising with other Kothi groups across the country; and by aligning with other human rights and mainstream groups like sex workers collectives, women’s groups, civil rights groups etc. Kothis have today staked out a claim in the national consciousness to their rights.

The debate on the texture that this package of rights should take is still not concluded. The final form it takes, and when it gets crystallised is also an open question. But what cannot be denied is that the very existence of the movement has given



the confidence to many Kothis to come out in the public, through open and visible programs, marches, film festivals, health camps, vigils, and protests. They have thereby chalked out that the nation, the state, and society at large cannot for long force Kothis into a rights vacuum.

The struggle has had limited impact on the actual incidents of violence; but the positive change is that today violence is not met with silence. Kothis loudly protest when occasioned with unconscionable violence. The change can be smelled in the air and that is an occasion for hope.

Annexure

Organisation

The Pratyay Gender Trust, Kolkata

Mithrudu, Hyderabad

Bharosa Trust, Lucknow

Udaan Trust, Mumbai

Sahodaran, Pondicherry

Firm Anasooya, Kochi

Snegyitham, Trichy

Sahara, Vishakapatnam

Humsafar, Goa

Lakshya Trust, Baroda, Gujarat

Mitr Trust, Delhi

Sarthi Trust Nagpur (INFOSEM Partner)

Dum Dum Swikriti (INFOSEM Partner)

The Sakhi Char Chowghi Trust
(INFOSEM Partner)

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Acronyms / Glossary of Terms

AIDS:	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CBO:	Community-based Organisation
CSA:	Child sexual abuse
HIV:	Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus
HR:	Human Rights
MSM:	Males who have sex with males
NFI:	Naz Foundation International
NGO:	Non-governmental organisation
STI:	Sexually transmitted infections
TG:	Transgender/transgendered
Kothi:	Feminised males who have sex with other males and who usually belong to economically poor and educationally deprived backgrounds.
Hijra:	Traditional community of transgender persons in India often governed by their own community rules and regulations.
Giria/Panthi:	The noun used by Kothis and Hijras to call/identify their male sexual partners.
Mard:	Hindi/Urdu word for man, usually connoting a high masculine demeanor.
Goonda:	A term having pan Indian recognition and used to identify a rogue, a bully, or someone who lives by adopting strong arm and violent tactics.

Project Partners

The Department for International Development (DFID) is the part of the UK Government that manages Britain's aid to poor countries and works to get rid of extreme poverty. It is headed by a Cabinet Minister, one of the senior ministers in the Government. This reflects how important the Government of UK sees reducing poverty around the world. It has two headquarters (in London and East Kilbride, near Glasgow) and 64 offices overseas. It has over 2500 staff, almost half of whom work abroad.

When DFID refers to international development it is referring to efforts, by developed and developing countries, to bring people out of poverty and so reduce how much their country relies on overseas aid. Many different things can contribute to development which reduces poverty, such as settling conflicts, increasing trade, securing more and better aid, and improving health and education.

The UK Government is involved in development because more than a billion people, one in five of the world's population, live in extreme poverty. This means they live on less than 65p a day. Ten million children die before their fifth birthday, most of them from preventable diseases. More than 113 million children do not go to school. In a world of growing wealth, such levels of human suffering and wasted potential are not only morally wrong. Many of the problems which affect us, war and conflict, international crime, refugees, the trade in illegal drugs and the spread of diseases like HIV and AIDS, are caused or made worse by poverty in developing countries. Getting rid of poverty will make for a better world for everybody.

DFID's values define the way in which it intends to live up to its strategic aim of halving world poverty by the year 2015. They also provide a framework for improved performance. These values are:

- ambition and determination to eliminate poverty
- diversity and the need to balance work and private life
- ability to work effectively with others
- desire to listen, learn and be creative
- professionalism and knowledge

Source: <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/>

Naz Foundation International is a Registered Not for Profit Charity in the United Kingdom, having its registered offices in London, with a regional liaison office situated in Lucknow, India. With a vision of a world where all people can live with dignity, social justice and well-being, and a belief in the innate capacity of local peoples to develop their own appropriate sexual health services, where the beneficiaries of a service are also the providers of that service NFI primarily focuses on males who have sex with Males (MSM). NFI's mission is to empower socially excluded and disadvantaged MSM to secure for themselves, social justice, equity, health and well-being through technical, institutional and financial support.

To reduce the risks of STI/HIV transmission and improve the reproductive and sexual health of MSM in developing countries, NFI has worked primarily in the South Asian Region to develop Community Based Sexual Health Services for MSM, where low income MSM collectives, groups, and networks are empowered by provision of appropriate training, funding support, technical assistance, institutional support, and other resources to run their own interventions for prevention of HIV and STIs.

NFI seeks to advocate on social justice and human rights concerns of low-income MSM, foster cooperation, understanding and support between organisations developing responses to sexually transmitted infections (STIs)/HIV/AIDS and sexual health needs of MSM and those with other constituencies, and undertake research to highlight the issues and problems that marginalised and socially excluded MSM face, identify solutions and pro-actively promote these findings, as well as understand the context of masculinities and sexualities, which can lead to more effective and sustainable sexual health promotion strategies for MSM.

NFI focuses on MSM because it believes that it's the right thing to do on humanitarian grounds, that it's the right thing to do epidemiologically, and that it's the right thing to do from a public health perspective. It further believes that MSM, whether their self-identity is inked to their same sex behavior or not, have the right to be free from violence and harassment; the right to be treated with dignity and respect; the right to be treated as full citizens in their country; the right to be free from

HIV/AIDS; and MSM who are infected with HIV have the right to access appropriate care and treatment equally with everyone else, regardless of how the virus was transmitted to them.

Centre for Media and Alternative Communication (CMAC) is a not-for-profit organisation based in New Delhi that uses media and art to create communication campaigns and education materials on a range of social issues including culture, human rights and public health. The key objective of the organisation is conceptualising and implementing specially designed campaigns, mounted on excellent technological skills.

It works with visual and audio communication employing traditional media and conventional advertising techniques towards creating awareness. To reach diverse constituencies CMAC uses public media such as print, web, and television. The organisation also uses other traditional communication methods such as street plays, songs, puppets, story telling, posters, leaflets, and wall graphics to reach groups that cannot be reached by modern methods of communication. Some of the key projects undertaken by CMAC include Haman Hain Ishq, an audiovisual project on communal harmony, released by Sony music and supported by Channel V and the ongoing six nation Campaign, "We Can" end violence against women.



