

Body, Pleasure and Politics

Imagination is more important than knowledge
— Albert Einstein

Homosexuality: Myths and Reality

by Afsan Chowdhury

Alternative sexuality is a complex issue because biology, psychology, sociology and theology all have claims on the topic. Each society will have to decide which is the dominant source of knowledge and lay down the rules for what is acceptable and what is not. But tolerance and sensitivity towards society's norms should be in our mind when we discuss such complex issues.

WHETHER homosexuality is a sexual alternative, the result of various psychological orientations or plain deviant and some depraved behaviour is another matter. Whether it is a crime deserving punishment, a behaviour aberration meriting treatment or counselling are issues which may be debated on for long but the fact remains that it is present amongst us and there are many who practice this, if only for a small period of their life. It is an area of knowledge, which we are only beginning to understand. And research is at a very nascent stage and the jury is still out on this. It is also obvious that had there been no AIDS pandemic, the issue of gay - commonly used term for homosexuality - may well have been in the closet for many years. The "AIDS transmission link" of male gays in the western world has greatly contributed to greater focus on this unusual sexual behaviour amongst both males and females.

It should also be noted that sodomy laws still operate in most post-colonial countries though in Great Britain itself, sex between any two consenting adult in private is no longer a criminal offence. In Bangladesh, sodomy law exists but has been allowed to lie low, as overt homosexuality is not socially practised. As a result, such activities are conducted secretly, or in a manner, which does not upset or disturb society. People do not pair up and start living as couple as in the west and that is why it is not considered a social threat. And hence considered not worth taking too seriously. In fact, in many levels of society, homosexuality is surprisingly accepted as an inevitable part of sexual growing up. At this point we should state what is homosexuality and heterosexuality.

It has been noted by anthropologists and zoologists including Desmond Morris who wrote the pioneering work (The Naked Ape) on the similarity between human and simian behaviour that men and apes both turn to sexual relationships including homosexuality if they are deprived of their usual sex partner over a period of time. Of the examples he cited, a number of them were taken from the fruit gathering expeditions of monkey herds. It transpired that after a period of time, older adult monkeys would seduce young adult monkeys - both males - and they would smoothen the process by adopting feminine postures to attract the younger partners. But these apes would not practice homosexuality once they returned to their permanent nests. This was termed as isosexuality or isolation driven sexual behaviour. Contemporary researches now shows that most animals practice homosexuality and many are actually bi-sexual in nature. Giraffes are one such animal whose sexual behaviour has been extensively documented. And they may do so even when they are not isolated.

That men who are away from their normal sex partners will have other sex partners is almost considered normal in many societies including our own though changes are noted. We know that sailors, who would experience the largest duration of deprivation, would have "spouses in every port". This meant they visited brothels. Much less talked about was what happened in the ships. In fact, so great was its social acceptance that such behaviour was greatly incorporated into social mores through jokes and

bawdy tales. The same goes for soldiers and to some extent religious seminaries. In our society, jokes about people away from homes who resort to same sex partners is very common but discussed only amongst peers of the same sex. Thus, by subsuming it amongst the many cultural behaviour patterns which appear to trigger off in certain extra ordinary situations, especially when the person is young, healthy and passing through a peak period of sexual yearning, it too has become part of the under culture which is very much there but not spoken of.

In the last eight years, in which I have probed the sexual behaviour of the Bangladeshi and Bengali people and as I undertake sex education activities as a formal activity, what has surprised me is the common strand that cuts across most people in the world. What distinguishes our society from say an African one, is its passion for secrecy and preserving socio-sexual etiquette. In Africa, a couple will stay together and not marry for many reasons including lack of money and not necessarily to keep sexual options open while out here, it is kept a secret and that appears to be the prime objective of the entire process. Of course, the compulsive reason is the perceived prestige of the family, the clan or the habitat. But the fact remains that most behavioural patterns in the world fall within a certain stage. For many this is a comforting rather than a disturbing thought. For others this generates insecurity.

History

Gay sex is more common than we think. In many cultures especially where long periods of isolation is common, we find its greater cultural acceptance. This also relates to

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the link with a particular kind of work and its importance. We found that in rural areas of Bangladesh, homo/isosexuality is not only common but accepted provided it did not impinge upon social transactions. Not only was it known and accepted but even considered a part of growing up by many. In some of the cases, the young boys were practically raped by older adults but it was considered a shame to make too much noise about it. In fact, it was brushed away by village elders as well and the victim would be the butt of jokes. This does not mean that homosexuality is the dominant trend. Far from it but as it does not disturb society or family one may consider it safe. This of course relates to males. The extreme dominance of the "Shakhi" syndrome has been argued by many as erotic and lesbian though not always overtly sexual. We would accept all the points but in a reduced degree.

In case of habitual gays, leading such a life is not a major problem either and a network of such gay partners are present though we have noticed that many gays who can manage to leave Bangladesh to settle abroad. There have been a number of AIDS induced deaths of Bangladeshis in different countries abroad which are known but many feel that such migrations allow them to lead an open and more satisfying lives. Some people have also

applied for amnesty claiming that as gay persons, their life is in danger, as they cannot live with their partner in Bangladesh.

Since statistics makes no sense as no quantitative study has been done, we shall not resort to it but my estimate would be that nearly half the population have had one homosexual encounter in life including some very innocent ones as children. These encounters may be as casual, maybe while growing up as a child, adolescence, maybe in periods of great loneliness or in situations like being in hostels, away from homes, in strange places with no access to company of any sorts etc. They should be classified as isosexuality though it is noted that casual isosexuals are high in number especially with the rise of migration for work, which involves living away from the family. A new breed of male children have entered the trade as commercial sex workers for those who seem to gratify either their latent homosexuality or be substitute for female CSWs. That is, male CSWs are less taboo in some cases however strange it may seem.

But if we go by growing statistical assessments of the total populations and the estimated number of gays, that would be between 2 to 5%. That number would translate into 2.5 million to 6 million gays. Of that, half would be males and that is 2-3 million people and that

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would generate a CSW market. To this should be added the isosexuals who are so many that we can safely assume that 10 million males are ready to pay for sex, male CSWs would be a natural presence in our society. It should be stated that most male gays do get married. Most of them do not have sex outside marriage but some do. If we go by the increasingly quoted figure that half of the males have sex before marriage and a large number after marriage, we can see that many gays must be into extra-marital gay sex. During an intensive period when I was "probing this problem" I found that many men who were initiated into gay sex during adolescence returned to it after giving it up for a period of time, getting married, finding heterosexual a little less satisfying and then indulging in both.

In most cases the married homosexuals I met were not happy human beings who had married either under the impression that marriage would cure them of being a Gay or family pressure had got them into such unhappy marriages. In some cases, some gay men had married to use it as a convenient façade behind which they carried on their homosexual life.

Lesbians

We have mostly spoken about the life of male gays but the life of lesbians or female homosexuals remain almost

unknown to us. I remember an incident, which occurred in Calcutta where I was trying to locate the haunts of closet lesbians who had formed a "club". My guide to the sexual underworld including the homosexual one was my taxi driver Ramlal. I was a source of great amusement to him because I had come all the way from Dhaka and was visiting all the places where commercial and non-commercial sex was transacted but was not tasting any myself. It took him three days to figure it out and then he grunted, "journalist". That explained my odd behaviour to him.

Ramlal had been mastering the streets of Calcutta for three decades but he had not heard of lesbians. Male gays yes but not females. In fact, I had to explain some of the "functional" aspects of such relationships. He flatly denied that such people lived in Calcutta. I gave him three addresses and told him to scout them out for me and let me know the situation.

The next morning Ramlal looked at me with a new found respect in his eyes. "For thirty years I am in Calcutta driving taxi and I didn't know of their existence and in three days you found them. You are a genius." I calmed him down and told him that one good contact can reduce ten years to a single telephone call. He, who would never even get out of the car when we were in Sonagachi because he had taken people there so many times was a different man at the club. He was so curious that in the club in upper middle class Calcutta, he stuck to with me like glue. I paid an outrageous entry fee for both of us and sat with the club "manager" who told me that the patrons had agreed to talk to me but they would not allow me to record what they said. While that reduced the exercise to non-work, I at least learnt more and more about the Bengalee lesbian world. Most of them were married and most were unhappy. Their husbands and children knew nothing. It was both physical and emotional loneliness.

In Bangladesh, the first few contacts I made with lesbians were through the male gays and that meant that like everywhere else, male and female gays were banding together. In Bangladesh that bond is weak compared to India but it is still there. And like in Calcutta, most lesbians are married and lead a sexually and often emotionally unsatisfying and uncomfortable life. They are focussed on their children as a substitute for affection. In most cases, the husbands do not notice or if they do the "family" overrides other issues and concerns.

There are very few cases of gay couples in our society but they are there. I met a few and found two facts common in both:

a. Most behaved like normal couples and preferred to lead independent lives.

b. Most family members and friends were supportive and it was a surprise to see how so many of them were helped by friends from both sexes. Without being burdened by marriages, they were more relaxed

and more honest than their male partners who were invariably caught in the web of their own lies.

Health factors

The issue has come into the forefront and become part of the public discourse because of the link between sexual behaviour and health. With it has come the question of dealing with it as a moral and legal issue, in societies where it is expressly forbidden and which are also conservative in nature this can prove to be a difficult territory to handle for public health and communication workers. The high level of STD and the growing threat of AIDS have made this inevitable.

Some of the Middle Eastern governments have handled this matter both with sensitivity and objectivity. I was told by the officials of the AIDS Information Centre located in Alexandria (Egypt) at a meeting

in 1994 that their prime objective was to create awareness about unsafe sex behavior amongst gays as well, and in this effort they had even been able to get the support of the Islamic clerics. The position they had adopted was that in Islam gay sex was "hakkullah" or "sin unto God". The matter would therefore have to be resolved by God and only God. While there was no space for homosexuality in Islam and it is a haram, there was still a responsibility on all other Muslims to help others including gays. So it was the responsibility of Muslims to counsel gays and help them lead a safe sexual life if they chose to. This had led to a lot of inter-action with the gay community in Arab society and greater awareness about their lifestyle.

In Bangladesh, the gay society is dominated by numerous compulsions. In fact, as long as

it is a secret behavioural pattern, most people can continue to have a gay sex life and be exposed to various risks including accessing commercial sex. Quasi-gay life is also noted in isolated congregations like in dorms of schools, college and university hostels etc. Migrant workers also practice this and to be honest no significant social problem is faced by them. I myself remember that some fellow students of ours would keep a partner in their room for weeks and while we joked about it, that is all we did. None were particularly bothered.

In many ways society understands that they pose no threat. As long as it doesn't disturb the accepted norms and values, society appears to be willing to put up with it.

Gays: born or made?

At the end, let me say a few words about why a person may be gay. For many years it was considered a devil inspired activity which also means it has been with us since sexual behaviour was noted and chronicled. Thus we can go back to the art of thousands of years and see it there. Gay activists often use such facts to state their case of being part of the mainstream of all past societies. We know of the Spartans and Greeks in gen-

eral who tolerated this, often went further and even nodded assent to sex between older and younger men. This was considered a high form of love actually and many researches have come up with this conclusion. Ancient western society was of course a little less tolerant of lesbianism and we know that the great poet Sappho was exiled to the island of Lesbos where she lived and composed some of her finest works. The word lesbian of course comes from the reference to the "residents of Lesbos" in ancient Indian art homosexual love is often depicted.

A more recent central Asian work, the memoirs of Babar has specific references to sex with young boys. This means society had no stigma attached to gay sex. Such phases in society have been common before and the present level of tolerance towards gays in many contemporary society is not a first time event.

In the post AIDS world, behavioural research relating to sex has leapfrogged and we now know more about these matters than ever before. And the research tends to show that gays are born and not made. That is, it is not a conditioned behaviour picked up from the psychological environment but something that is dictated by the brain. The area, which controls such impulses - hypothalamus, is where the differences are noticed and the breakthrough in this area is generally considered to have been made.

The same pattern is noticed with female gays and like the males, their sexual orientation is also decided in the womb. This is universal for all human beings. Most scientists dealing with socio-biology are saying that being gay and not being a gay is not a matter of choice but a matter of being determined while being gestated. While that makes many gays feel a lot less guilty about being a gay, it is still being debated in scientific circles and within a few years science will know much more about it. But that does not mean everyone will accept it whichever way the findings go.

This also does not negate conditioning the socio-sexual environment, which may actually decide this for some or many. Moreover, there is a matter of dominating and subsumed trends. That means, homo and heterosexual behavioural patterns may be present in all of us and the fact that the percentage of bisexuals are the highest in society and many practice homosexuality for a short episode under certain circumstances means we can not ignore this finding totally. That means conditioning plays a role on what may have been partly determined. A person with bi-sexual intents may decide not to practice homosexuality for whatever reasons but the sensations may arise and he may suppress it though be unable to deny. It is not a clear-cut yes or no in all cases. In fact the opposite is probably true.

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Sex workers rallying for rights as citizens.

— Star photo by A K M Mohsin

A Space for the Hermaphrodites

(Hizras)

We often find groups active protesting human rights violations. There are also groups who speak for the rights of the sex workers. But there is none to speak for these handicapped humans commonly known as "hizra" whose rights as human beings have always been violated. They are deprived of all sorts of civil and political rights. How painful and agonised the life and living of a hermaphrodite can be is beyond anyone's imagination.

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termed as "ambiguous genitalia". There are mainly two types of hermaphrodites. A true hermaphrodite is defined as a person who possesses both ovarian and testicular tissue. This is rarely seen. But pseudo-hermaphrodites are more common. A male pseudo-hermaphrodite is a person whose gonads are exclusively testis but whose genital organ exhibit incomplete masculinisation. In Bangladesh, this group of hermaphrodites is mostly found. On the other hand, a female pseudo-hermaphrodite is a person whose gonadal tissue is exclusively ovarian but whose genital development exhibits an ambiguous or male appearance.

In case of these pseudo-hermaphrodites, a boy child, mistakenly, starts to be socialised as a girl or vice versa. And here comes the term "psycho sex". According to Dr. AKM Anwarul Islam (Urologist & Andrologist of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujib Medical University), studies of individuals who have been reared in the sex opposite to their chromosomal or gonadal sex, provide strong evidence that gender identity is not coded primarily by sex chromosomes. Rather it appears to be "imprinted" by words, attitudes and comparison of one's body with those of others. This is what we call "psycho sex" or in other words, gender identity, defined as the identification of self as either male or female. Generally, gender identity agrees with the sex of assignment in the intersex patient, provided that the child is reared unambiguously and appropriate surgical and hormonal

therapy is instituted, so that the child has an unambiguous male or female identity. Under these circumstances, gender identity is usually established by 18-30 months of age. If, in puberty, discordant secondary sexual characteristics are allowed to develop and persist, some intersex patients develop doubts about their gender identity. This ultimately results into the transformation of a hermaphrodite.

Thus it becomes important to identify the true sex of a child immediately after birth. Any confusion has to be sorted out immediately so that the child can be brought up with an unambiguous gender identity.

Life and Living

We often find groups active protesting human rights violations. There are also groups who speak for the rights of the sex workers. But there is none to speak for these handicapped humans commonly known as "hizra" whose rights as human beings have always been violated. They are deprived of all sorts of civil and political rights. How painful and agonised the life and living of a hermaphrodite can be is beyond anyone's imagination. We interviewed some of them to know more about their lives. At first they were suspicious about our motives. Then they asked as to what difference these writings would make for them. The struggle of their lives made them suspicious about everything.

Hermaphrodites or "hizras" are rejected by their own families. Some of them were given away by their parents just after their birth. We have a common

belief that whenever a child with ambiguous genitalia is born, "hizras" go there to take that child forcefully. It is true that they want to have that child with them, but it is also true that the parents do not hesitate to give away that child to them. They were brought up by other hermaphrodites. Some are driven away at their puberty when their discordant secondary sexual symptoms are exposed. Still many of them know where their family lives. Some of them at times go back to their parents, brothers and sisters. And at times they have even been cared as long as they have something to provide for the family. Then they are again harshly rejected.

According to the information provided by the hermaphrodites, they live in groups of four or five to protect themselves from social sufferings. The eldest one acts as the head of the group. They name themselves according to their perceived gender identity. They have sexual relationship among themselves. These groups are concentrated in certain areas and they are aware of other groups. They have leaders for each particular area. It seems that they obey their lead-

ers with complete loyalty. Some of the hermaphrodites refused to talk to us without informing their leader. But they are not ready to expose their dwelling places.

The main source of earning of these hermaphrodites is prostitution. Normally they stay within their houses during the daytime. After the dark they gather in places where prostitutes are mostly seen. They suffer severe sexual harassment and exploitation. There are a lot of social activities to rehabilitate or to uphold the rights of female prostitutes. But nothing has been done for the hermaphrodites engaged in prostitution. We talked to some of the police members patrolling those areas who accused these "hizras" of snatching away money from lonely passers-by. The accused replied that they have to take recourse to such means only to pay their clients refusing to pay them. Another source of earning for these "hizras" is toll collection from different markets of the city. They openly admitted that if the shop owners refuse to give them money, they start spilling the commodities of the shop or create some obscene. Immediately the shop owner complies

and fulfils their demand. These they have to do as nobody wants to employ them. In order to sustain their lives they have no other way but to take such disgraced ways of earning. But neither prostitution nor toll collection ensures them their basic necessities. There are many a days and nights which they have to spend without food.

Hermaphrodite expressed their frustration at the situation they face in public places. They are always treated as laughing stock. Since their childhood they experienced severe caustic comments. Without any reason people tease them, annoy them and sometimes even abuse them physically. At times they are compelled to be have harshly and rudely due to complete insecurity.

Is it Curable?

Hermaphrodites are born due to some natural causes beyond the control of human beings. But if it is detected at early age, there is possibility of curing them.

Choice of Sex: The most important thing is to determine the sex of the new-born child. Determination of sex helps to create psychological and behavioural pattern. Concerned nurse-mother, doctor or the gy-

naecologist is the first person to identify the sex of the child. If there is any sort of ambiguity, a paediatrician or a urologist needs to be consulted immediately. In the management of a patient with ambiguous genitalia, at first a sex for rearing (that is most compatible with a well-adjusted life and sexual adequacy) will be diagnosed and then assigned. Once the sex for rearing is assigned, the gender role (those aspects of behaviour in which males and females differ from one another in our culture at this time) is reinforced by the use of appropriate surgical, hormonal or psychological measures.

Reassignment of Sex: Reassignment of sex in infancy and childhood is always a difficult psychological problem for the patient, the parents, and the physicians involved. While it is easier in infancy than after 2 years of age, it should always be taken with much deliberation and with provision for long-term medical and psychiatric supervision and counselling.

Reconstructive Surgery: Sometimes through some surgical measures, hermaphrodites can be turned into normal males or females. It is desirable to initiate plastic repairs of ex-

ternal genitalia prior to 6-12 months of age.

Hormonal Substitution Therapy: Development of primary and secondary sex organs can be influenced by hormonal substitution therapy. But this has to be done with utmost care.

Psychological Management: Sex is not a single biological entity but the summation of many morphological, functional and psychological potentialities. There must be no doubt in the mind of the parent or the child as to the child's true sex. Chromosomal and gonadal sex are secondary matters; the sex of rearing is paramount. With proper surgical reconstruction and hormone substitution, the individual whose psychosexual gender is discordant with chromosomal gender, need not have any psychological catastrophe as long as the sex of rearing is accepted with conviction by the family and others during the critical early years.

Creating Space for the Hermaphrodites

Some hermaphrodites are beyond any treatment. They have to live a life full of ago-

nies, sufferings and tormentations. They are distressed in accepting the fact that they are not like normal human beings, and are sexually handicapped. Besides this, the anguish they suffer from the society makes it further unbearable for them. Society can play a vital role in reducing the sorrows of hermaphrodites. They want to work and earn their livelihood like others. The GOs and NGOs should come up with some income generating projects for them. Once they can earn their livelihood in a respectable manner, their social acceptability will increase. All of their basic rights have to be fulfilled. They have to be rehabilitated. Besides, we all should have the awareness that hermaphrodites are human beings as well. We should not alienate or abandon them from the society. Rather, if we try to accept them, the abnormalities they have in their behaviour will slowly be eradicated.

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The topic of our next issue is: **Re-examining the Examination System.** Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre For Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 8316769; Email: imtiaz@bangla.net.