

A study of the Gay Movement with reference to Mumbai

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the attitudes towards gay sexuality from a sample (n=1157) of the general population. It explores the lives, hopes, aspirations and challenges of gay-identified men who live in Mumbai (n=19). The role of two organizations that are a significant and an essential constituent of the Gay movement in Mumbai, namely, The Humsafar Trust and Gay Bombay are a part of this study. The most significant challenges that face the gay community in the city are with regard to Section 377 of the IPC, the prejudices that people harbour, and the need for better dissemination of correct information to break stereotypes and myths about gay people. The paper reports the findings of the study and concludes with the usefulness of the study and its scope.

Keywords: *gay, homophobia, homosexuality, sexuality, sexual orientation*

I. INTRODUCTION

A society that is steeped in heterosexism and homophobia is more likely to be intolerant and non-accepting of gay men. Also, it is not uncommon that many people, especially in cities like Mumbai express *external* support when asked about their views on gay rights. This is believed to be the politically correct thing to say, as it is impressive, and sounds good in principle. The problem confronts us when, it hits from close quarters, for example, when a child, student, co-worker, priest, teacher, parent, leader declares (read, “comes out”) that he is gay; or, one discovers through the grapevine, or through tell-tale evidence that is lying around (such as a gay magazine, an internet link to a gay or gay porn site, gay-specific client information, and the like).

Today there is *far more* visibility of gay men, especially in a city like Mumbai, though they may not necessarily shout from the rooftop nor wear their sexuality on their sleeves. The problem of homophobic attitudes and heterosexist influences cannot disappear in an instant either. Thus, there emerges a need to change mindsets, and this can only happen by creating awareness and sensitivity among people, beginning with oneself. There is a need for a scientific enquiry into the lives of gay men, and this study is one humble attempt. Such a study would place on record, about the existence and challenges that confront gay men.

Society in general harbours prejudices about gay men and their lives; these biases are drilled into heterosexual notions of *everything* – through religion, culture, media, role models, parents, language, comic strips, advertisements, games etc. All such influences have a cumulative effect on the development and formation of a person’s identity as well as the collective consciousness of what is ‘acceptable’ or not.

There are continual clashes with culture and ideology – that hit at everyone with alarming success. It is in within such a hostile environment that gay men negotiate their lives, their spaces and their joys of living. The present study investigates the shades and colours of ‘gay’ men and their lives. It also considers the role that individuals and groups ‘perform’ - as “agencies” for change; with its concomitant challenges, failures and successes.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature reviewed can be summarized as follows:

- Attitudinal studies report a less favourable attitude of heterosexual males towards homosexual men/gay males when compared to females in the respective samples. [1]
- Several studies show that there is a significant correlation between the content of education and attitudes to LGBT people or homosexuality. [2]
- An overwhelming majority of the Indian studies revolve around merely reporting that homosexuality exists in a specific location – in an institution, on the streets or in big cities. [3]
- Studies demonstrate that ‘contact’, self-acceptance and association with positive groups lead to better psychological adjustment and self-esteem among gay men. [4], [5]
- The impact of Christian values, perceived to be on the conservative end in mainline churches tend to develop negative attitudes among some believers. Also, the church's official policy or teaching on homosexuality is conservative or stoically silent. [6], [7], [8], [9]
- The role of teachers in the classroom is emphasized over and over, and how this usually has a positive effect on those exposed or educated about LGBT issues. Merely have an inclusive policy, while important, does not magically change to an inclusive school or university climate where LGBT youth may feel less vulnerable. [10], [11], [12]
- The need for professionals like – teachers, social workers, counsellors and mental health experts – to be educated about queer issues and trained with skills so that they can be better equipped to deal with LGBTQ+ students and clients is highlighted. [13]
- Most of the studies clearly fall into the constructivist view of homosexuality, implying here that ideas about sex, gender, sexuality, identity and so forth are pushed by the agendas that societies pass on through socialization. [14], [15]
- The role of media in creating awareness is mentioned and the impact of significant role models in media. [16]

The educational studies highlight the role of education and training in creating awareness, sensitivity, inclusivity, breaking prejudices, myths and stereotypes and encouraging tolerance and acceptance, and integration of all people.

III. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The present research is an effort to explore the Gay Movement in Mumbai from the theoretical perspective of Anthony Giddens’s ‘Structuration Theory’. [17] His theory asserts the role of ‘agency’ in the process of change.

It highlights the fact that the social structure is created by humans and influenced by human actors. It is *certainly not* an unchangeable entity.

The study explores the intertwined nature of social institutions - marriage, family, religion, education, polity and economy and the manner in which the 'non-monolith' gay movement interacts with these 'parts of the whole'. This multi-way impact occurs within a 'time and place', through the 'actors' who play their part. This includes gay men, 'gay' organizations and numerous associations that may or may not be structured, may or may not be visible either – and yet, they continue to exert influence and impact lives.

IV. AIMS OF THE STUDY

1. The study has been undertaken with the following broad aims:
 - i. To study the Gay community in Mumbai, and
 - ii. To understand its role in the built up of a movement for change in society.
2. To ascertain the relationship between the Attitude to Gay Sexuality (AGS) with the following *variables* such as education, gender, and religious identity.

V. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To achieve the above-mentioned aims, the following *specific* objectives have been formulated:

1. To ascertain the *educational level* differences in the AGS.
2. To ascertain the *gender* differences in the AGS.
3. To ascertain the *religious* differences in the AGS.
4. To understand the *challenges* of Gay males.

VI. HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

For the purpose of this study, the following **research hypotheses** were formulated on the bases of *specific variables* of the study.

1. There are significant *educational* differences with AGS
2. There are significant *gender* differences with AGS.
3. There are significant *religious* differences with AGS.
4. There is a significant impact of Gay organizations on the Gay movement in Mumbai.
5. There is a significant relationship between the religious beliefs and the challenges faced by gay men.

VII. SAMPLING DESIGN

1. Data is obtained for the **survey**, using *stratified random sampling*. It was used as it is a means of increasing precision and representation and was easily available. (n=1157)
2. For the purpose of obtaining data from **gay-identified males**, *snowball sampling* was used as gay men are not easily identifiable, nor is there any known, readily available lists of the 'gay' population. (n=19)

3. To obtain data from NGOs, *purposive sampling* technique was used, based on the researcher's past experience with them and based on the suggestions and responses obtained from gay-identified men, during their interviews with the researcher. (n=2)

TABLE 1: Distribution of Respondents for the general survey by socio-economic characteristics.

<i>Socio-economic characteristics.</i>	<i>Respondents</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	517	44.7
Female	640	55.3
<i>Religious identity</i>		
Hindu	568	49.1
Muslim	116	10.0
Christian	283	24.5
Buddhist	14	1.2
Jain	45	3.9
Zoroastrian	44	3.8
Other	87	7.5
<i>Education completed</i>		
High School	16	1.4
Higher Secondary School	172	14.9
Undergraduate	306	26.4
Post Graduate	180	15.6
Professional	261	22.6
Graduate	222	19.2
<i>Type of Family</i>		
Joint	312	27.0
Nuclear	845	73.0
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single	872	75.4
Married	285	24.6
<i>Age category</i>		
< 18 years	212	18.3
18 – 22 years	402	34.7
23 – 45 years	412	35.6
> 45 years	131	11.3
Total	1157	100

TABLE 2: Distribution of gay-identified gay male participants for in-depth interviews

<i>Socio-economic characteristics.</i>	<i>Respondents</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Religious identity</i>		
Belief in God	9	47.37
Belief in Spiritualism	3	15.79
Non-belief in God	7	36.84
<i>Age category</i>		
20 – 29 years	11	57.89
30 – 39 years	8	42.11
<i>Education completed</i>		
Standard XII (HSC)	2	10.52
Professional Diploma/Degree	8	42.11
Graduation	4	21.05
Post-Graduation	5	26.32
<i>'Out' gay male</i>		
Openly gay/homosexual	11	57.89
Open with some reservations	2	10.53
Not openly gay	6	31.58
Total	19	100

VIII. INSTRUMENTATION

The present study employed the use of the following tools, all of which were prepared by the researcher:

- i. **Attitude to Gay Sexuality Scale (AGSS)** - to obtain data from the general population, to ascertain their attitude to gay sexuality (AGS).
- ii. **Semi-structured interview schedule cum Interview Guide** – to obtain data from gay-identified men.
- iii. **Interview Guide** – to obtain detailed information from associations (NGO/CBO) working for gay rights and related issues concerning gay men.

IX. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study and discussion are as follows:

1. There are no significant *educational* differences in AGS among the following categories: Higher Secondary and Undergraduate students, Graduates and Post Graduates, Undergraduate students and Graduates, and among Graduates and Professional students.
2. There are significant *gender* differences in AGS among Higher Secondary, Undergraduate, Post Graduate and Professional students.
3. There are significant *gender* differences in AGS among Hindus in the Total Sample.
4. There are no significant *religious* differences in AGS among Hindus and Christians.

Hindus and Muslims, Christians and Zoroastrians, Christians and Muslims. However, there are significant *religious* differences in AGS among Believers and Non-believers (agnostics and atheists). Significant gender differences were found among those who identified as Hindu.

5. There is no significant relationship between *education* and view of the positive role of NGOs working for gay rights; between *education* and the view that gay sexuality has led to an increase in the number of AIDS patients; between *education* and positive attitude towards LGBT films; between *education* and view regarding harassment of gays, in the Total Sample.
6. A significant relationship is observed between *gender* and attitude of friendliness towards gay males; between *gender* and attitude of dislike towards gay males; between *gender* and attitude of openness to working with a gay boss, and between *gender* and positive attitude towards LGBT films, in the Total Sample.
7. There is a significant relationship between *religion* and attitude towards befriending a gay person, and between *religion* and the view that gay sex is not a part of Indian culture, in the Total Sample.
8. There is no significant relationship between *religion* and attitude towards gay people as being human as any other, and between *religion* and favourable attitude towards legalizing same-sex marriage, in the Total Sample.
9. There is a significant relationship between unwillingness to have gay friends, and moral judgment of gay sexuality; between unwillingness to discuss gay sexuality and the view that gay behaviour should be discouraged; between a negative view of gay men and the belief that gay sex is not a part of Indian culture; between the view that gay film characters do not make people gay and the positive view that LGBT films create awareness about sexual minorities; between willingness to have a friendly approach towards gay people and the view that gays should not be made fun of; and between the acceptance of gay people and supporting the rights of gay people to choose their life mates, in the Total Sample.
10. There is a significant impact of Gay organizations on the Gay movement in Mumbai.
11. There is a significant relationship between the religious beliefs and the challenges faced by gay men.
12. The Humsafar Trust and Gay Bombay are reported as being significant organizations in Mumbai that work for the rights of gay men in the city. Their contribution has been widely acknowledged by each gay-identified interviewee (n=19). While the Humsafar Trust is a more structured and formal organization, the latter is more informal. But, both cater to various needs of the gay population in Mumbai city.

The discussion below is with regard to specific *variables* of the study. The context of discussion relates to (i) the hypotheses formulated for the general survey, and (ii) in-depth interviews with gay-identified men in the study.

With regard to **education**: There were no significant relationships with regard to mean AGS score and Jr. College and UG students, Graduates and PGs, UG students and Graduates, and graduates with Professional students. This could be attributed to the fact that the sample comprised urban students from Mumbai, who are exposed to LGBT issues. There have been many among the sample who reported reading daily newspapers, and several Mumbai papers and the media at large have been reporting about LGBT issues, pride march, Section 377 and its impact and so forth. So, there is the likelihood of greater awareness.

With regard to ‘teachers’ as a category, the study has shown that the mean AGS score of teachers is *not* as favourable when compared to professionals. This could well imply that students and non-students who are picking up their knowledge about gay matters/issues are obviously looking elsewhere – to friends, media reports (print, television, radio) and the internet (sites, blog, tweets, YouTube, TEDx, etc.). Some studies reviewed have shown that the educational curriculum often lacks LGBT content.

It was found that ‘professionals’ had a higher AGS score when compared to ‘teachers’ in the Total Sample (n=1157). In the context of a learning environment, it is interesting to note here that in the literature reviewed, there were studies which reported the lack of awareness about LGBT issues within the curriculum and the need for an LGBT-inclusive curriculum.

Perhaps ‘teachers’ as a social category, are seen, especially in Indian culture - as an extension of the family. They become role models for youth and tend to follow the conventions; conform to the ‘well-trod path’ - of no discussion of subjects or issues pertaining to sex, sexuality, queer issues. Interestingly, among the gay men who participated in the study, an overwhelming majority reported that teachers in school *did not* discuss matters about sex nor sexuality. In fact, the topic was done cursorily (if at all) and *all* participants reported that there was no mention of ‘homosexuality’ in any session – whether in the biology class or a “sex education” session.

With regard to **gender**: Significant differences were found between gender and the following categories: Junior College students, UG students, Post Graduates, Professional students/graduates and among those who identified as Hindu in the Total Sample. There was a significant difference in the AGS score of females when compared to males. This corresponds to the literature which also reported that females have a more positive attitude towards gay sexuality and gay people. One could probably explain this as gay men are found to be less threatening to women, in a patriarchal society, which otherwise has a tendency to undermine female abilities or objectify women. Women as victims of discrimination probably also understand discrimination of gay men better than ‘cisgendered’ males.

There were significant relationships of gender with the attitude of friendliness towards gay males, dislike of gay men, openness to working with a gay boss and positive attitude towards LGBT films as creating awareness about sexualities in society.

With regard to **religion**: There were no significant differences between the following pairs: Hindus and Christians, Hindus and Muslims, Christians and Zoroastrians, and between Christians and Muslims. However, there were significant differences between those respondents who identified with a religion (read, believers) and those who did not (that is, non-believers, which also includes agnostics and atheists). It is possible that religious expectations and customary practices, colour people’s ideas about gay sexuality, gay men, and gay behaviours. Among the gay men who were interviewed only the gay-identified males who were ‘Christian’ reported conflict between church teachings and their sexual orientation.

The study showed a significant relationship between religious identity with (a) the willingness to befriend gay persons and (b) perception that gay sex is not a part of Indian culture. Among the total sample of gay-identified men, all gay men were well aware of the fact that same-sex desire and same-sex love was a part of Indian culture from ancient times. Most interviewees in this study made explicit references to the Mahabharata, Kama Sutra and Khajuraho temple sculptures.

In the Total Sample (TS), there was found to be a significant association between each of the following:

- Unwillingness to make friends with a gay person and the view that gay sex is wrong.
- Unwillingness to discuss gay sexuality and the view that gay behaviour should be discouraged.
- A view that looks down upon gay men and the perception that gay sex is alien to Indian culture.
- The view that gay characters played in films do not make people 'gay' and the positive view that LGBT films help to create awareness about sexual minorities.
- Openness to having a friendly approach towards gay people and the belief that gays should not be made fun of.
- Acceptance of gay people and supporting the rights of gay men to choose their life mates.
- In the Total Sample (TS), 88.2 percent of respondents did not support the view that LGBT films promoted gay sexuality. This is an indicator that many respondents are aware that people don't become gay; it is *not* a choice.
- With regard to the statement that gay men are the cause of the increase in the number of AIDS patients, 61.7 percent disagree. Still, a little under 40 percent think otherwise.
- While there is a large majority who support same-sex *behaviour* among consenting adults in private (79.8 percent). Yet, the majority do *not* support same-sex *marriage* (69.8 percent are against, 11.6 percent are not sure).
- With regard to the view that gay people need professional counselling, only 56 percent of the TS did not think so; but 20.3 percent agreed that they needed counselling and 23.7 percent were not sure. This could be rooted in the false notion that 'gayness' can go away with therapy/counselling. Psychologists and psychiatrists today know fully well that no one can change from being gay to straight or vice-versa. There is just no scientific evidence to support this claim.
- It is heartening to note that only a minuscule 5.87 percent of the TS think that people can become gay by merely watching a film that includes a gay character. This is purely a notion that is steeped in ignorance.
- It is a matter of concern that only 17.8 percent of the TS disagreed that gay sex was not a part of Indian culture, whereas 21.3 percent agreed, 24.3 percent strongly agreed and 30 percent reported 'not sure'. Ironically, all the gay men in the study were well aware of same-sex desire and same-sex love as being a part of Indian cultural heritage. Again, this view is a result of ignorance or the sheer unwillingness to become enlightened about sexual diversity inherent in Indian culture.
- Among the gay-identified men – the most significant concern was with regard to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code as it criminalized gay men, hampered their lives, rendered them as an invisible category; denied them the right to live life fully and with dignity. It was a denial of their human right to love another human being.
- Most evident also was the sorry state of 'sex education' in schools and the attitude toward sex or discussion of relevant issues that plague the minds of hormonally raging adolescents. There is a need for Sex Education to include discussion of sex, sexualities, gender identities, homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality. It would have to be open and 'inclusive' in order that people get a 'holistic' understanding rather than a highly doctored version with a 'different and non-inclusive agenda'.

- It was unanimously observed that mainstream movies and television serials *do not* represent the lives of gay men in a manner that is realistic; it is nearly always demeaning, flippant, and insensitively handled. This needs to change. Within the general population, there were those who seemed to think that LGBT films promoted gay sexuality. Again, this is built on collective ignorance and lack of accurate data. Prejudices and biases are rampant and have to be dispelled. Being ‘gay’ is who one is. One cannot suddenly decide to become gay, or feel emotional and sexual attraction, or experience sexual arousal towards members of the same sex.
- Child sexual abuse of young boys came up several times and with severity in some cases too. Young boys do not ‘become gay’ due to child abuse; but definitely, the impact of early sexual abuse of young boys affects them in ways unimaginable. In the sample of gay-identified males in the present study, less than four subjects reported being sexually abused as a child. Also, those who were abused did not report that the abuse led them to become ‘gay’.
- ‘Coming Out’ was *always* a matter that came up during the interviews. Clearly, ‘coming out’ is a means to live one’s life with dignity. The inability to do so limits the freedom to live out one’s sexuality, in the same manner, that people of ‘heterosexual’ orientation actually take for granted. Among various interviewees, the dominant view was that ‘coming out’ has to be a personal process and a personal decision.
- With regard to the general survey, it is very evident that people lack an understanding of what it means to be ‘gay’. There is plenty of ignorance; myths about gay men, gay sex, and gay sexuality abound. Here, sending out correct information is the crying need.
- There is much confusion about ‘choosing to be gay’ in the general population that was surveyed. A false notion that gay men ‘choose’ to be ‘gay’ is on the minds of many. Every single gay man who was interviewed for this study *did not choose* his sexual identity. The literature reviewed reflects the same. Being gay is *not* a choice. The choice lies in the individual’s realm only with regard to wanting to ‘come out’ or not. To be ‘open’ or not involves an element of choice, albeit, a difficult and traumatic one for some, and seemingly impossible for many more. There is no conclusive evidence for the ‘gay gene’ but all evidence point to a genetic explanation for being gay.

X.CONCLUSION

This study, on the whole, reflects a positive attitude of the respondents in the general survey (n=1157) towards gay sexuality. There are some reservations on the matter of legalization of same-sex marriage rights for gay men. Reservations about gay men, and gay rights, and gay culture is seen in less than one-fourth of the sample. The in-depth interviews reveal how gay-men have to negotiate their spaces and their lives around the environment they find themselves in. About fifty percent of the sample was ‘openly gay’. All interviewees shared about the inadequacy of sex education imparted in school, if at all, in the Total Sample reported the absence of any inclusive discussion about homosexuality. The study provides exposure to the rich contribution of the Humsafar Trust as a formal organization and gay Bombay as an informal organization in spurring the gay movement – as being significant agencies that take the gay movement forward. The interviews also throw light on the role played by the world of internet through its numerous online forums and groups. Also several

misconceptions regarding gay sexuality being a 'choice' prevail. There is a unanimous view as regards section 377 of the Indian Penal Code; that it cannot and should not continue in its present form. It is definitely the big obstacle in the path of gay rights; it also denies the right to dignity of life to gay men.

The limitation of this study essentially revolves around the fact that its respondents were most familiar with the English language; so there is an underrepresentation of those who are most comfortable in responding in local, regional or vernacular languages.

A study such as this can be useful in identifying myths about gay men, their lifestyle, gay marriage and gay rights. It provides insights into the prejudices that form mindsets for many. The findings can help propel discussions about gay sexuality as well as discussion on how to make education and specifically sex education more inclusive.

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