

PATRIARCHY AND THE PRODUCTION OF HOMO-EROTIC BEHAVIOR IN NEPAL

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Introduction

In Nepal, the issue of marital rape brought to the fore hitherto hidden issues of the manner in which socially constructed sexual roles make it exceedingly difficult for a woman to identify and develop her own sexual desires and needs. The Supreme Court decision on May 1, 2002 established marital rape a crime, and emphasized the necessity of female consent. Dissenting popular opinions ranged from accusations of imposing Western models onto the Nepali family structure, to warnings of the detrimental effect of the law on spousal relations and the stressed greater importance of the need to educate and increase the consciousness of women rather than establish such legal precedents (Shrestha 2002; Kathmandu Post 2002; Nepal 2059 v.s.). The struggle for the right of women in their various societal roles and identities to decide on sexual matters continues to be fiercely resisted within dominant patriarchal Nepali culture.¹

Feminists have long seen the issues of sexuality as being a crucial issue in so far as much of the oppression of women is borne by, mediated through, and constituted within, sexuality (Mackinnon 1983; Rubin 1993: 27, 28). Patriarchy has constructed gender and thus femininity in such a way as to enable male sexual domination and female sexual submission (Millet 1970, Frye 1998). Women are supposed to be sexually shy, innocent, passive, dependent, unaggressive and submissive. Men on the other hand are supposed to be more sexually aggressive, dominant, the initiator and active partner in sex and in general, in need of more sex.

1 I use the term “dominant patriarchal culture” as a shortcut to describe the hegemonic form of patriarchy in Nepal. This is not to negate the fact that given ethnic, class and caste systems structure gender, “multiple patriarchies” exist in Nepal, differentially informing, structuring and contouring the lives of women in Nepal. See Tamang 2002. I furthermore retain the unfashionable term “patriarchy/patriarchies” in order to highlight the political agenda (compared to “gender studies”) of seeking to challenge the dominant patriarchal ideologies which justify women’s subordination as natural, universal and inevitable.

“Aggression and the ‘need’ to dominate form a routine part of what is accepted as [normal] male sexuality” (Coveney et al. 1984: 9). Theorists have argued that this normalization of male sexual dominance and female sexual submission is institutionalized by heterosexuality (Rubin 1993, Butler 1990). “Sexuality is gendered in fundamental ways and gender divisions sustain, and are sustained by, normative heterosexuality” (Jackson and Scott 2002:20). It is important to note that while gender identities help produce heterosexual space, gender and sexuality are not the same. Butler, however, has powerfully argued that binary gender identities only makes sense within a heterosexual framework:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each terms, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender and desire (Butler 1990:22-3).

It is this internal coherence of sex, gender and desire and the overall framework of “compulsory heterosexuality” that Queer theorists have most effectively challenged and destabilized with emphasis on the general fluidity of identity and the destabilizing of what it means to be “feminine” and “masculine”(Abelove, Barale and Halperin 1993; Burston and Richardson 1995). Bell and Valentine (1995) cite an example in which gays activists in Canada staged a downtown parade in Montreal declaring “if you’re in clothes you’re in drag”: ‘irreverent combinations of identities proliferated, including fags² posing as dykes³, dykes dressed as clone fags, and bisexuals pretending to be fags pretending to be lipstick lesbians” (Bell and Valentine 1995:14 quoted in Duncan 1996a: 139). Blurring the boundaries and challenging the solidity of gendered identities is key.

Historians have revealed that the creation of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” as defining identities is a relatively recent development (Katz 1995, Weeks 1995) with the progressive institutionalization of a heterosexual norm and marginalization of the sexually ‘perverse.’⁴

2 Slang for gay men.

3 Slang for lesbians.

4 Rubin makes clear that modern Western societies rank sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value (Rubin 1993:11). “Individuals whose behavior stands high in this hierarchy are rewarded with certified mental

According to historian Jefferey Weeks (1995) the notion of gay identity is a recent phenomenon dating from the nineteenth century which developed as homosexuality became organized into subcultures and when these became public. The development of gay identity is linked not to the sexual acts but to the meanings given to these activities.

While studies have revealed the existence of same-sex sexuality throughout history (Vanita and Kidwai 2000; Wieringa and Blackwood 1999), very little is known about same-sex sexuality in Nepal.⁵ This essay is an initial attempt to analyze issues of patriarchy and sexuality in Nepal by thinking outside the confines of “compulsory heterosexuality” and focusing on male-to-male sexual relations in Nepal today. While work needs to be undertaken to understand the historical nature of these constructions, it is hoped that this study provides an introduction into some of the dynamics of male-to-male sexual relations and the implications they have for understanding present day dominant gender constructions in Nepal. This analysis is mainly based on work conducted from March to May 2003 with the Blue Diamond Society⁶ (BDS), the

health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support and material benefits,” a system which has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics as “[i]t grants virtue to dominant groups, and relegates vice to the underprivileged” (Rubin 1993:12,15). She argues “[m]ost people find it difficult to grasp that whatever they like to do sexually will be thoroughly repulsive to someone else, and that whatever repels them sexually will be the most treasured delight of someone, somewhere. One need not like or perform a particular sex act in order to recognize that someone else will, and that this difference does not indicate a lack of good taste, mental health, or intelligence in either party. Most people mistake their sexual preferences for a universal system that will or should work for everyone” (Rubin 1993:15).

- 5 Research generated by, or with the help of Blue Diamond Society (about which more shall be said later) and factually incorrect media reports aside, a MA thesis on the topic of “Sexual behavior of men who have sex with men and risk factor of STI and HIV/AIDS” was completed in 2004, from Tribhuvan University (Luitel 2004). However as a whole, Luitel’s MA thesis is full of theoretical, analytical, and factual errors.
- 6 The name of the organization “Blue Diamond” had roots in the fact that founder and chairperson Sunil Babu Pant studied in Belarus, where the slang term for gay is “blue” and also because blue represents peace in Nepal. Furthermore, the diamond in Buddhism represents love and compassion.

only organization in Nepal working for rights of gays⁷ and more recently lesbians.⁸ Sporadic interactions and interviews have continued till today.⁹ It also includes interviews with various other self-identified “gay” men in Kathmandu and staff of donor agencies of BDS, Family Health International (FHI), Population Studies International (PSI) and the Naz Foundation International.

I begin this piece by giving key definitions with which to start thinking through issues of male-to-male sexuality in Nepal. This is followed by a sketching of the places in which they interact, people with whom they interact and their gendered sexual roles. A rethinking of sexual categories and the implications of the activities of men who have sex with men (MSMs) for how patriarchy in Nepal and its relationship to homoerotic behaviors can be understood is finally discussed.

Rethinking Male-to-Male Sexuality in Nepal

Men involved in male-to-male sex in Nepal can be categorized into two main broad categories. One is that of self-identified “gay” men who tend to be English educated, middle/middle upper class, whom I have termed as being “Thamel Gays” for the areas in which they mainly socialize. As in the main urban centers of India, I believe that “gay” communities are nascent in Nepal, with the active self-labelling of identity covering older patterns of same-gender sexuality (Balachandran 2004). The second group of men I have categorized as the BDS crowd and it is on this group that much of this analysis is focused, reflecting as I believe it does, dominant expressions of male-to-male sex in Nepal.¹⁰

7 Unable to register Blue Diamond Society as an NGO working for the health of “homosexuals,” Sunil Babu Pant ultimately had to officially state BDS’ goal as a NGO working for male sexual health.

8 This article is derived from research on sexuality, gender and HIV undertaken for Save the Children, UK, in November 2003.

9 Overall, 15 formal interviews were taken with BDS members, and 6 with non-BDS members. It must be stressed, however, that while these interviews were very informative, much more information, viewpoints and exchange of ideas took place during informal and casual side conversations during the initial 3 month period and in numerous interactions since then.

10 As pointed out by Manjushree Thapa, these categorizations may well be better organized around class than geographic areas, especially given that BDS people also frequent the Thamel area and that historically, ruling-elite Shah/Rana men have indulged in same-sex relations. I have retained the BDS and Thamel Group categories however, in so far as Thamel Group interviewees sought to differentiate themselves quite explicitly from “BDS”

Key to understanding male-to-male sexual behavior in Nepal is an awareness of the language and gendered sexual roles in which such relations are conceptualized. A BDS document supplies the following definitions:

Meti – A self-identified label used by feminised males who have sex with men, and used [sic] their feminine behaviours in public spaces to attract men for sex. They usually are sexually penetrated. However, many *metis* will also be married to women and have children in a culture with “compulsory heterosexuality.”

Dohori – A label given by *metis* to other males who are sexually penetrated and also penetrate males, and whose public behavior is normatively masculine. Most of these males do not have a label for themselves. Some will act like *metis* in public spaces to access *Tas*.

Ta/“Real”Men – A label given by *metis/hijras* to “real” men who sexually penetrate, whether this be a woman or another male. *Tas* do not have a label for themselves other than MAN. *Tas* may have sex with *metis/hijras* because they like having sex with males, or they like having anal sex, or they want “semen discharge” at that moment. Called “body heat” in the region. These are men from the general male population.

Hijra – A self-identified term used by males who define themselves as “not-men/not women” but as a “third gender.” *Hijras* cross-dress publicly and privately and are a part of a social, religious and cultural community. Ritual castration is part of the hijra identity. Sex with men is common. They also have their own language, know as *ulti*. (Mostly in Terahi [sic]) (Blue Diamond Society 2003:13).

In terms of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, *metis* are at most risk because of the fact that they are the penetrated partner in anal sex and have multiple partners. *Tas* are said to have less risk because they are penetrators – penetrating both *meti* and female partners (Blue Diamond Society 2003:14).

Importantly, the Thamel Gays do not use this terminology. Indeed, very few of them know the existence of these words as they have limited interaction with the BDS crowd. Interviewed Thamel Gay’s used the English terms “gay” and “queens.” Of the few who were familiar with the

and the form of “gay” identity that they portrayed. Furthermore, interviewees from both groups stressed that dominant cruising areas for BDS – Ratna park and the Dynasty nightclub – were not frequented by the richer Thamel Gays, in a clear geographic demarcating of class boundaries. Space and place play an important role in the performance of gender and sexuality. See Duncan 1996b.

above terminology, two were dismissive of the “made-up” words, with one of them using the word “ridiculous” in English to describe the BDS vocabulary. Class and related ease with the English were the most obvious markers of differences between BDS and Thamel Gay members, as will be discussed in more detail later.¹¹

Meeting “Men who have Sex with Men” (MSMs)¹²

With the caveat that “whilst knowing about the places in the city where men who have sex with men meet and have sex is vital it is also imperative to recognize that the sexual topography of the city eludes any definitive schematic” (Boyce 2002:23), in the first ever ethnographic field research conducted on MSMs, the core cruising areas for MSMs in Kathmandu were listed as the following: Ratna Park, Pashupati, Bishal Bazaar supermarket, the new bus station, the old bus station, Durbar Square, Durbar Square Patan, Durbar Square Bhaktapur, Tribhuvan University Gardens; Naag Pokheri, Thamel and Sundhara (Boyce 2002: 20-21). During a mapping session held by a Naz Foundation International trainer with BDS members, in response to the question of places where MSMs have sex, apart from the places listed above, the following were also cited: Kula manch; Bhrikuti Mandap, college, kirtipur jungle, usually all toilets - Bir hospital toilets, Bishal Bazaar toilets, shop toilets, swimming pool toilets¹³; the roof of Bir Hospital; Bhugol park in front of Bishal Bazaar; the alleyways around Bishnu Joyti after 10pm; the R and B shopping complex (New Road area); Pashupati area as a whole; anywhere there are army barracks; the airport compound before the security step up; under bridges; lodges; hotels; bus parks; cinema halls; dark corners; river edges; taxis; Basundhara; houses under construction; campuses; jungles and shops.

Liechty has written on the rise of prostitution in Kathmandu and its link to the emergence of new forms of public space in such areas as New Road and Thamel which offer anonymity in the chaotic bustle of commercial life (Liechty 2001a). The above list hints at the manner in

11 Tellingly, all Thamel Gays spoke predominantly in English in the interviews.

12 This term is problematic, as will be made clear later, for the exclusive identity-based category it intones. However, I retain it for the initial ethnographic part of this article as it is the dominant term in which male-to-male sexual behavior is discussed.

13 Interviewees stated that toilets of swimming pools were particularly “fun” because everyone was so “clean” after swimming.

which these forms of public space are being utilized for sex – commercial and non – by MSMs as well as the female prostitutes that form the central concern of Liechty’s piece. While “[l]imited male prostitution” with tourists is referred to in a footnote in Liechty (2001a:66), it is not clear whether this is MSM or “heterosexual,” activity. One BDS member did discuss his relationships with foreign men but it was framed in the context of “a boyfriend,” as opposed to client. As will be discussed later, most of the boyfriends and clients¹⁴ of these men were Nepalis predominantly drawn from the working and lower middle class, with a few middle class men as well. That one of the prime locations for MSMs was the Ratna park area, the focal point of travellers from all parts of the country coming into the valley, is indicative of the types of MSMs to be found in this vicinity. Ratna park and Bhugol park was cited by an older MSM (around mid 40s) as being the primary pick-up areas in the years gone by. Indeed it was around Ratna Park about 15 years ago that he met an older *meti* who consequently introduced him into the life of sex with men.¹⁵ In so far as some of the younger interviewees remarked how they had had their first sexual experiences in the capital in and around the Ratna Park area, these new public domains continue to function as an introduction to “modernness” in all its sexual and other freedoms for men.¹⁶

In the litany of places cited as cruising grounds and places of sex—usually said with choruses of laughter as one person remembers another place, to be substantiated by others piping in with agreement - it is clear that a specific and limited area is hard to map out. Furthermore as revealed by the lengthy discussion of whether one can still use the roof of Bir Hospital as it had recently been locked, the locations are familiar not just as one-off places, but regular haunts. One place not cited by the Boyce report, but very popular with BDS members were night-clubs, specifically the Dynasty nightclub in Kathmandu, a regular weekly, and sometimes more, venue for those dressing in drag. The Jump Club, Maya Cocktails, and the Himalayan Java Coffee Lounge in Thamel were also

14 Pigg has illustrated the problem of establishing unproblematic boundaries between categories of “clients” and boyfriends/lovers for commercial sex workers (CSWs) in Nepal (Pigg 2001:194). As will be discussed in more detail later, this is as true for male sex workers (MSWs).

15 More research is needed into the history of public “cruising” by MSMs in Kathmandu. According to interviewee estimates, this practice must be at least 20 years or so old.

16 See Liechty 1996 for the ambiguous implications of modernity and “freedom” for middle-class women in Kathmandu.

cited as hangouts although the latter two were more favored by the Thamel Gays, the richer and more educated MSMs.

As cited in the Boyce report, active cruising areas were not the only places to socialize and meet sexual partners (Boyce 2002:23). After initial encounters other locations could be and were arranged. In an interesting illustration of the manner in which social contexts reflexively impact lived realities, an older MSM related how with all the publicity received by BDS (reports on BDS activities and police brutality), he had experienced an increase in men looking for MSMs at the Dynasty. Easy to spot given their drag attire, he explained that after an initial encounter many would then say it was no longer necessary to meet either in drag or at Dynasty, and other meetings were arranged for later dates.

Interviews with MSMs living in Pokhara and Bhairawa made clear urban centers as a whole provide conducive conditions for male-to-male sex, which again is not that different from the experience of female sex workers. Ethnic and geographic variations were evident in MSM activities. In Bhairawa, a MSM related, rich “Marehs” (Marwaris) invite MSMs into their houses for “massages” i.e. sex. Furthermore, with the border nearby, MSMs in Bhairawa were able to easily cross the border for sex, to dress in drag, etc., and to return to Nepal, their “heterosexual” married persona intact. This was said to be especially true of Bahuns, who according to this Bhairawa MSM, were the second largest MSM group after Marwaris in the area.

However, illustrated by the repeated and disparaging comments made by MSMs living outside the valley about the “outlandish” – “chara” “outhawlow” behavior of MSMs in Kathmandu, a great deal more freedom is available for MSMs in the capital, a freedom that to MSMs living outside Kathmandu, Kathmandu based MSMs appear to be taking advantage of. This also has generational dimensions. Older MSMs who enter BDS are horrified by the “undisciplined” nature of the younger MSMs there.

As indicated by the case of Bhairawa, cross-border sexual activities in neighbouring Indian states (Boyce 2002:23) play not an insignificant role in the lives of MSMs.¹⁷ Two respondents gave examples of experiences in

17 In one group session with a Naz Foundation International trainer on “places where to have sex,” the citing of “the cinema” also led to an in-depth discussion amidst laughter and merriment of a certain cinema hall in Calcutta where the audience (by inference all men) was only seated for the beginning of the film. Once the lights were turned down and the film started, everyone

Darjeeling, India, where they said “homosexuals” were much more open and free. Boyce also revealed that of the men included in his research, some had worked abroad in Gulf States and cited having a high number of male sex partners while abroad (Boyce 2003:23). This was confirmed in my interviews with both the Thamel Gays and the BDS crowd. Important in terms of mapping transnational flows especially given Nepal’s history, is the manner in which one interviewee described in detail his life with his “first husband” a soldier in the British army who for all intents and purposes “kept” him as a “wife,” visiting him during his holidays. That the respondent was convinced that all in the British army were homosexuals,¹⁸ and that his “husband” (whom the MSM eventually left¹⁹) had a wife and children, indicates the difficulty in mapping a certain population in a limited territory.

The issue of the British Army is also significant in terms of specific ethnic and cultural configurations that contour MSM activities. Two MSMs noted the manner in which work with MSMs in Pokhara is particularly hard not only because condom distribution and HIV/AIDS

would head for the toilets to have sex. Illustrative of the easy cross-border travel between India and Nepal, it furthermore hints at the kind of common sexual nodes and experiences of MSMs on the subcontinent.

18 In his memoirs, ex-British officer Morris described his initiation into “homosexuality” with “a Gurkha” while he was serving in the British Army (Morris 1960).

19 That certain emotional connections still existed between this MSM and his “ex-husband” was revealed when the MSM shared that he was going to move to Pokhara and that he would “tug” (cajoling exploit in this context) his ex into buying him the household and other things that he would need to set up his abode. The MSM later returned from Pokhara, as he said the outreach program there had been cancelled.

In a recent conversation with a FHI personnel, they had no knowledge that any steps had been taken by BDS to provide outreach services to MSMs in Pokhara. This is indicative of the manner in which BDS as a NGO funded by donors for “men’s sexual health” has in the past and continues today to pursue a political “gay” rights agenda of its own. The conflict between the two is most evident in the manner in which BDS donors continue to remain silent about the physical and sexual abuses of MSMs, mostly employees of BDS, at the hands of police and other people. Members of BDS have expressed their dismay at what appears to be the “lack of concern” of donors of their rights beyond that of general health. Interestingly, 2 Thamel Gays expressed distress at the “political” nature of BDS and the manner in which, as one of them stated, they were moving away from the “HIV mission.”

awareness programs have just started there.²⁰ The fact that MSMs there are ex- or current British army men mostly from the Gurung community further complicated issues. The tight-nature of that community, and the fact that ties range internationally – i.e. a phone call from Kathmandu means information will go to Hong Kong and Singapore etc., where current and ex-British army people live in large numbers - heightened the risk of their sexuality being “found out.” Interviewed MSMs stated that it would take just one phone call to be “outed” internationally as well as nationally. This is further substantiated by the fact that many of the international congratulatory and other phone calls made to BDS are said to come from ex- and current British army personnel who have yet to reveal their sexual orientations. Such connections underscore the difficulty in mapping discrete populations of MSMs.

As stated above, Thamel Gays do not as a rule associate with BDS or its members.²¹ Apart from being a clear class issue – most members of BDS are from the lower middle class – the fear of being associated with “queenies” and “drags” and the fear of being “outed”²² as a result of being associated with BDS was the dominant reason cited behind their reluctance to form ties with the organization. One interviewee stated that BDS is “full of Queens” while another, inbetween commenting on their “worst makeup,” complained of the manner in which BDS had skewed the portrayal of “gays” in Nepal as all drag queens. This in turn, this Thamel Gay explained, had alienated a lot of gays who do not like wearing makeup. Overall this Thamel Gay clearly thought of the BDS crowd as being crass and class-less, blaming them for the negative portrayal of “gays” in Nepal.²³ Another Thamel Gay suspected that

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- 20 Older MSMs in Kathmandu testified how hard it had been to initially network with other MSMs. As 4 MSMs stressed, the relatively conducive environment for MSM outreach work in Kathmandu today is the result of many years of hard work.
- 21 One Thamel Gay stated that his relations with other Thamel Gay friends had considerably cooled since he had started helping out and hanging out at BDS.
- 22 Thamel Gays interviewed said that they were “out” only to their “gay friends.” In general this was true for the BDS crowd as well, with two exceptions of accepting parents. Tellingly, a MSM participating in the 2003 Gai Jatra parade hid behind me when he saw family friends, even though he was wearing heavy make-up and a wig.
- 23 This Thamel Gay was particularly outraged by an article on MSMs published in *Himal* magazine (Nepal and Humagain. 2059 v.s.) which translated “anus” as being, in his words, “shit-hole.” Clearly concerned with image, he asked “Couldn’t they find a better translation?”

although there may be Thamel Gay men who want to dress in drag, fear of being associated with BDS restrains them from doing so.

However, it is important to note that apart from the fact that contributions were elicited from the Thamel Gay when BDS was initially being set up, some BDS members straddle both worlds as will be shown below, and there are many Thamel Gay well wishers who while keeping a low profile, provide economic support and moral encouragement to the group.²⁴ Overall, however, the unwillingness of the Thamel Gay to come out into the public has meant that the *meti*/drag stereotype of gays in Nepal continue to persist inspite of the complaints by Thamel Gays.

Furthermore it was made consistently clear by the BDS group that the middle and upper middle class never frequent Ratna Park. The main cruising areas for the Thamel Gays – apart from Himalayan Java Coffee Lounge, the Jump Club and Maya Cocktails – was the internet. As a Thamel Gay in his late twenties explained, while it had been mainly “word of mouth” before, “the gay scene exploded with the internet.” Previously there had been 2-4 web sites that one could access, but some had later closed. This Thamel Gay explained that Indian gay sites used to be the predominant access points, and one could find all the “gays” in Nepal there, easily identifiable by such obvious user-names like “nepalgay.” According to him, the usual mode of operation was for some chatting on-line, e-mailing, and then talking on the phone, before finally meeting in person. One BDS member who also used the web for meeting people said he had made a separate e-mail list for “friends” and for “boyfriends.” This guy noted that he would initiate conversations on the web only after screening and making sure that the person was “gay.” The above cited Thamel Gay was convinced that the younger generation was much aware of their sexual identity because of access to the web. That he himself thinks that he was a “slow learner” who only realized his sexuality at the age of 22, hints at the age at which young “gay” men may be accessing the web. Indeed, a young 21 year old Thamel Gay said that he had become initiated into Nepal’s “gay” world through the internet.

Who are MSMs?

While no clear numerical figure can be put on the number of MSMs in Nepal, apart from cruising sites and places where sex takes place, the

24 For example, many Thamel Gays were said to be watching the start of the 2003 BDS Gai Jatra gay rights parade in Thamel from the Himalayan Java Coffee Lounge.

types of MSMs encountered is an important indicator of population contours. In another session with a Naz Foundation International trainer, the following list resulted from a brain storming activity on people with whom they have sex: teachers; students; tailors; servants; drivers; army and police guys; ragpickers; shop keepers; road side sellers and vendors; bottle, stove, paper collectors; prisoners; electricians and plumbers and other house workers; guards; barbers; doctors; travellers and tourists; rich folk²⁵; journalists; sports people; yogis and priests.²⁶

Overall, as in the above list of places where sex take place, as a new set of people were remembered, there was a chorus of agreement and laughter with appropriate examples of encounters shared. One that delivered particularly raucous humor and agreement was that of ‘barbers’ when, replete with arm movements across the body, a MSM described how a barber would start massaging²⁷ his head, neck, arms and upper body and then would continue his wandering hands slowly towards the groin area.

As in the list above of locations in which MSMs had sex, there seemed to be no limit to the list of those with whom they had sex. However, there did appear to be some broad contours in which one could categorize MSMs. For example, those picked up at Ratna Park tended to be lower-middle class and working class, compared to the mostly lower-middle class and middle class to be found at Dynasty. Interestingly, army and police personnel were said to constitute major sexual partners to be picked up at Dynasty.

Thamel Gay interviewees pointed out that it was a middle, upper-middle class group of people, who comprised the main population with

25 The separate category of “rich folk” speaks to the generally lower class and the lower middle class population with whom the BDS group interacted. Indeed, a description of a romantic encounter on a bus between one MSM and a fellow traveller included much stress and fawning over the fact he was “kusto ramro” – “so good” – with underlying emphasis on his well-dressed appearance and good manners in all its implicit class overtones.

26 As a whole, that everyone had a sexual drive was clear to BDS members. From remarks that lesbians “were just like us” to the clarificatory remarks offered to the question of what was “thigh sex” – “that which monks and priests do” – sex was natural and, as expressed by one MSM, as necessary to humans as food and drink.

27 Barbers in Nepal, as in India, often provide head and upper body massages along with haircuts to men.

whom they had sexual relations.²⁸ According to one Thamel Gay, the majority of Nepali MSMs on the web were older married men with children who did not frequent the Jump Club or The Himalayan Java Coffee Lounge. They were mainly in search of one night stands. The upper middle-class, older population did not frequent these hang outs either, he said, as they already had specific party and other networks, confiding that “you will be surprised to see big name/rich people at these gatherings and say ‘oh, he’s gay?’” While a mixture of *jāts*, *janajāti* men were said to exist in some numbers within the Thamel Gay community, a fact which this MSM ascribed to the “Gurkha connection.”

In terms of frequency of sex, two young Thamel Gays offered the opinion that “gays are sluts” as a whole who “just want to jump into bed.” Indeed, it was because places like the Jump club was “full of sluts,” that these 21-22 year olds said they now much more preferred to stay at home. Yet, one of them opined, “maybe because we are half woman and man, and that both sides want sex” that “gay men are so slutty.” As a whole, Thamel Gays interviewed stated that one night stands and short term relations were the norm for Thamel Gays as well, with just a few long term couples and partners.

Internet access plus class determinants also meant that inter-racial couples were not that unusual, although one Thamel Gay stated that the last 2 years had seen a decrease in “gay” tourists in Kathmandu, and on the web as a whole.²⁹ For one BDS member, the web offered a way to meet foreigners, his obviously preferred partners.³⁰

While it was acknowledged by 2 respondents that perhaps their younger ages made them averse to stable relationships,³¹ overall both

28 One astute and well educated young Thamel Gay noted that the a-political nature of Thamel Gays was a function of their class privilege – they weren’t the ones to be arrested and/or harassed by police. Easily able to rent hotel rooms, Thamel Gays could more easily buy their anonymity. Furthermore, according to this guy given that most of them would eventually go study and settle in the US or UK, “why would they care about rights in Nepal?” That the population of reference for this man was the upper-middle, young, English speaking late teen and lower 20s group is quite clear.

29 The conflict in Nepal has had an obvious role in decreasing the number of tourists and thus the overall number of “gay” tourists.

30 This MSM had asked me to hook him up with an Israeli boyfriend. Some weeks later, we met at a BDS function where he pointed out in pride his new Moldavian man.

31 One young MSM declared no need for relationships, and picked up men around Ratna Park only for sex.

Thamel Gays and BDS members were found to not have long-term relationships. The inability of MSMs to maintain monogamous relationships was one that was highlighted by nearly all interviewees. 2-3 BDS members declared that they currently had 3-4 “*tas*.” However, Sunil Babu Pant stated that over a hundred men had “married” in temple rituals as well as unofficial ceremonies.³² How long such relationships actually last was not made clear. The fact that there was an older *meti* – referred to as being the “aama” “mother” of the group - who mentioned that he wanted to bring in his “husband” to introduce to Sunil Babu Pant, hints that there may be more of these relationships than is at first noticeable or declared. Indeed, the MSM whose first “husband” had been a *lāhure*, said that his *ta* in Darjeeling wanted to marry him, but he was unable to commit. Furthermore, a *dohori* confessed that had he known what he knows now (his sexuality, his rights etc.), he would have married his boyfriend of old. Instead, at that time (10-11 year ago), he had picked his lover’s bride, and married him off.

Speaking of present and past sexual partners and experiences, overall three interviewees spoke of the myriad of sexual opportunities to be had in schools and especially hostels, but also spoke of harassment and torment from peers.³³ Opportunities at home where because of sex-segregation, the practice of sharing beds with people of the same sex when guests or families arrived, were also cited by BDS interviewees as opportunities. In a group discussion, MSMs all agreed that sleeping in the same bed would lead to a “wandering hand” and more often than not, sexual activity. However, there were instances in which such advances were outrightly rejected. Then, as one MSM said, “it is so embarrassing. I can’t even look them in the face in the morning. I die.” Yet apparently, such episodes have not prevented them from having “wandering hands.”

The rapid ethnographical research conducted by Boyce indicated that while the age of first sexual intercourse for males and females in Kathmandu was 21 and 20, the majority of MSMs stated their first sexual experiences with other men occurred in the teenage years with a high number occurring before puberty (Boyce 2002:25). “Many respondents talked of having sexual encounters with relatives and family friends at a

32 Unlike the marriage ritual between two lesbians which received much news attention (Kathmandu Post 2000), the unions between men have gone unpublicized.

33 Being called “chakkas” and “hijras” were the norm for both the Thamel Gay and BDS members interviewed.

young age. It was notable that many of those men who described such sexual experiences depicted them as unremarkable, suggesting that to some extent they may be a common experience for many men in Nepal” (Boyce 2002:25). Indeed, one MSM I interviewed stated that since all men learn sex from other men, he had no idea what people were talking about when they questioned the prevalence of MSMs.

“Pinkey Janeh” and Fun

As in the rest of South Asia,³⁴ men selling sex is a prevalent activity in Kathmandu (Boyce 2002:30). In common parlance, male sex worker’s referred to this practice as “pinkey janeh” – a term picked up from female sex workers.³⁵ While Boyce recorded that men reported earning Rs10-Rs50 for this kind of work (including, masturbation, oral and anal sex) with the partner who is penetrated – *meti* – being paid (Boyce 2002:30), interviews revealed slightly different findings with a wide spectrum of earnings, not necessarily taking the cash form. In general *metis* earned the most – between Rs 5-1500, with *tas* able to earn Rs30-500 and *dohoris* earning Rs50-300. However, these were only estimates with *metis* often spending huge amounts of money on *tas* they fancied, or receiving gifts in kind, or willing to take Rs100 or so off their taxi fare etc., – the numbers varying according to the whim of *metis*. Again, as with female sex workers, establishing clear boundaries between “clients” and “boyfriends/lovers” is very problematic (Pigg 2001:194). Interesting in terms of cultural variations, according to a *meti*, in Darjeeling it cost him to pick up men, the price being Rs10 Indian (Nepali Rupees 16), a plate of momos and chang (Tibetan alcohol).

In terms of the number of sexual encounters, an issue that Boyce does not address, *meti* sex workers are said to average 3-5 penetrative partners (Blue Diamond Society 2003).³⁶ This was reiterated in interviews. However, the story of one guy having sex 50 times in the Pashupati area served as a catalyst for other similar stories including one *meti*’s

34 Interview with Shivananda Khan, executive director of the Naz Foundation International. See also Ramakrishna et. al. 2004.

35 It is clear that male sex workers like female sex workers have been able to gain from the very uninstitutionalized nature of prostitution in Nepal (Liechty 2001a: 70).

36 No numbers could be gained for the Thamel Gays. However, at the time of research, one of the senior BDS staff belonged to the Thamel Gay group and was as startled as I was to find out the amount of sexual activity cited by MSMs.

experience of 18-19 sexual encounters in one night and one *dohori*'s night – as penetrator – with 7 men in a row. While the veracity of these accounts cannot be substantiated, the fact that the discussants all took the numbers in their stride and the general conversations about lovers met etc., point to overall generally high number of sexual encounters.³⁷ Indeed, one respondent who had pointed out that the media coverage of BDS had increased the number of MSMs at their regular discos, stated that now – as a result of the publicity – he was able to find 5-10 partners in one night.

Gendered Sexual Roles

As mentioned above, there is a popular and informal vocabulary used by the BDS crowd and the MSM community with which it mainly interacts, by which people are categorized at being *ta*, *meti* or *dohoris*.³⁸

Most of the members of BDS self-identified themselves as being *meti*.³⁹ The latter is said to have originated in Darjeeling and is derived from the term “to quench one’s thirst,” with the connotation that the role of the *meti* is to satiate men’s desires (Boyce 2002:17). Effeminate in behavior,⁴⁰ with an attraction towards the masculine and nominally

37 Invited many times to go dancing with them, I was told by one MSM that I would be able to learn much from the manner in which after the dance places close down at 2am, how “pick-ups” would then proceed. I was offered detailed descriptions of different people entering cars, going places, returning back to the restaurant where they would all hang, and then going back out according to when they were able to pick up someone new. The rate of interactions implied multiple partners for all involved throughout the night and into the early morning.

38 According to one *meti*, in Darjeeling younger metis are referred to as “*putali*” (doll) while “husbands and boyfriends are called *Swamis*. The gendered identities are clear despite the differences in terminology.

39 The South Asian equivalent for *metis* is *kothis*.

40 While I did not ask personal questions of how they came to know of their sexuality, stories of their experiences revealed that most of these men knew of their sexuality early on. For example, an MSM from Bhairawa remembered being taken to the doctors by his parents when he was 11. Concerned about his feminine behavior, they were told not to worry as his behavior was said to be a normal condition out of which he would grow. This MSM then recounted how he used to put on dresses in the house behind locked doors. In another telling account and in a very different context, a MSM retorted that if beatings make a person straight, he should have been straight years ago given the amount of beatings he had suffered for behaving in a feminine manner. Another MSM recalled, standing hands on the hip in the most feminine of

'heterosexual' men, some of the *metis* met in the process of this research had adopted feminine names.⁴¹ It is *metis* who dress in drag.⁴² That BDS has helped build a support group that provides space for *metis* and allows them to become their "true selves" was particularly illustrated by the fact that when new members joined BDS, they would appear to be masculine *tas*. This raised the hopes of all the *metis* already in the group. However, invariably, these *tas* would become *meti*, a fact often reiterated and bemoaned by the rest of the *metis*. Clearly portraying an outside masculine image in line with societal ideals of "a man," the need to continue acting out such a role among BDS friends and the growing network of MSMs became negated over time. Importantly though, there were gradations of femininity among these *metis*, with some decidedly more feminine than others. The two *tas* that were at BDS were always at the receiving end of jokes and teasing. As will be discussed later, their "heterosexual persona" in public as well as the nature of male sexual behavior as a whole, mitigates their need for these forms of community, which for *metis* seem to be quite crucial.⁴³

Boyce notes that a high percentage of *meti* identified men in Kathmandu are married and have children (Boyce 2002:18). He then draws upon the example of one married interviewee having sex with his wife to achieve orgasm (as opposed to men), and states that "[t]his may be a common pattern of sexual behavior" (Boyce 2002:18). However, to the majority of the *metis* met in this research, the thought of having sex

postures, that he had been told by his family "to get friends who play the guitar and ride motorbikes." The latter is of course, very telling of the images of masculinity existing in Nepal today.

- 41 For example, Manish was also known as Manisha. While BDS office rules forbade the use of feminine names, outside the office, many referred to each other in terms of "didi" and "bahini." That these are terms of reference that they preferred was made clear when one MSM recounted how thrilled he had been in his youth when someone called him a girl.
- 42 Important to note here is that not all *metis* dress in drag. Indeed two *metis* interviewed had tried it and said they didn't really enjoy it. If they did dress in drag, they only did it once in a while at the behest of friends. However, the vast majority of *metis* met at BDS dressed in drag and went dancing at least once a week.
- 43 When asked why *tas* came to BDS, Sunil Babu Pant responded that they came because *metis* brought them for sexual health and HIV/AIDs needs, and also because while they were dominant *tas* at BDS, they may well also play the more "passive", "insertee" role with other partners. The categorizations of *ta* and *meti* are of course social and porous constructions.

with a woman was something that was abhorrent to them. As one *meti* put it, “it can only be done when drunk.” When asked what he would do if he was the last man on earth stuck on an island with the last woman on earth, one of the most effeminate of the *metis* promptly said “I would pull her hair” – a defiant, and feminine retort – which was received by a chorus of laughter from friends. It was a continuous puzzle for this MSM how men could be bisexual. In his words “how can a guy want to hold another man’s penis and then use that hand to fondle breasts?” The preference to be penetrated⁴⁴ was revealed in many conversations with *metis* including one indignant account of a MSM who had eagerly gone to a hotel room with 7 Indians,⁴⁵ only to discover that he had to be the *ta* with them. As a *dohori*, this MSM was in the minority at BDS. Furthermore, two self-identified bisexuals stated a lack of understanding and consequently space in BDS for bisexuals, given the predominance of *metis* and the hegemony of feminine behavior and identity. Indeed, confessions of having had sex with women were revealed by two shy and embarrassed *metis*. It is not however clear whether the preference to be penetrated then leads to a perceived need to negate their masculine physical attributes during sexual encounters as stated by Boyce: *metis* “try to avoid having men touch their genitalia as they do not want physical attributes which designated their masculine sexuality to be involved in sexual activity” (Boyce 2002:17).

For many of the *metis*, dressing in women’s clothes – dressing in drag⁴⁶ – was a common practice. Particularly telling was the comment of a MSM that he would one day take a photo of himself when in drag and when in pants and write under the photo of himself in drag “me when I am not forced to pretend by society.” Claiming themselves to be “drag ko

44 This was true even in role play in training sessions when *metis* would be more than reluctant to play the role of *ta*. The overall inclination to anal sex moreover was revealed in one hilarious episode in which when a heterosexual couple were supposed to be portrayed, the two *metis* performing forgot their roles and had to be stopped from acting out anal sex. This is of course not to say that anal sex occurs between heterosexuals.

45 It appears clear that Indian tourists are clients of both male as well as female sex workers (cf. Liechty 2001a: 65).

46 Important to note here is that the MSMs met in this study referred to the dressing in women’s clothes as “drag”. Indicative of the transnational information flows and changing terminologies, an older MSM said that they used to just say “to go as a girl” when they did the same in earlier days. That Sunil Babu Pant, the head of BDS studied abroad and has many international networks and friends, has much to do with such trends at BDS.

jat,” or “born a man, [with a] woman’s heart,” they wore glamorous dresses, short mini skirts, halter and tank tops, high heels, shimmering jewellery and coiffed wigs to the discos where – they proudly declared to me – they would get the ladies discount.⁴⁷ A great deal of time and money, an estimated Rs. 2500-3000,⁴⁸ was said to be spent on “drag clothing.” Imagining themselves to be Hema Malini or Madhuri Dixit⁴⁹ for example, one MSM said that when others see them dressed in drag, they are type cast as “royal family/actress or model or sex worker.” When asked why royal family, he answered it was because of their “high style.”⁵⁰ *Metis* claimed that the women at Dynasty would get mad at them – derogatorily calling them ‘chakkas’ – because men would go with the *metis* and not with them. One interviewee boasted of when he actively persuaded a guy to stop chatting up a girl in Dynasty and to come with him instead. Interestingly, once in drag, they said that they found their voices automatically changed – became higher in pitch and more feminine. In drag, allowed to “become themselves,” these *metis* played hyper-feminine roles.⁵¹

It is clear that these *metis* at one level thought of themselves as women. However, probing further, for example for reasons for going in drag, resulted in such answers as the following: to have a “*keṭī*” feeling, to “get a husband” and “to go as a girl.” The fact that when describing other women they would sometimes add a “*pakkā keṭī*” (real girl/woman) is also instructive. Furthermore, while they imagined themselves as women, they were also acutely aware of the dangers of taking on this role. Asked if they were afraid of being found out they were men while in drag, they all answered affirmatively. “Kasto ḍar lāgcha” (we’re so afraid), was a common refrain. Two MSMs answered that without having one or two drinks before entering the taxi to go dancing in

47 They also told me that they always use the ladies toilets when in drag.

48 With about Rs. 800 spent on a wig alone, costs increased with the need for nice clothing, perfume, shoes, handbags etc. The problem of having to have “drag clothing” professionally cleaned also increased expenses as washing these dresses at home was not an alternative.

49 Both are famous actresses in India.

50 Indeed, one of the MSMs had dressed in drag for the 2003 Gai Jatra parade and was resplendent in beautiful make-up, tight slinky brown dress and high heels. He indeed looked very glamorous.

51 One respondent said that these changes usually happened to him whenever he started talking to men – with increase in feminine gestures and postures as well as the change in voice occurring even while talking over the phone.

drag, they wouldn't have the courage, even though both of them were older MSMs with much experience in drag. In so far as the main incidents of harassment, beatings and rape at the hands of police⁵² had occurred when they were in drag, this is not surprising. While one took the precaution of not going out alone with a "client" until he had met them at least 2-3 times, it was not clear that this was a dominant practice for others. Despite the clear risks involved, the lure of sex, companionship and fun – the thrill of getting men's attention when in drag – was said to be compelling.⁵³

The confidence in being able to attract men was not limited to when they were in drag. From the indignant tone in which one MSM asked why would any guy go with an old, haggard, dirty female sex worker when he could go with him, to the MSM who moved to Pokhara and was convinced that he could "have" his new landlord's son – which he did, to the overall general negative group answer to the question "have you even been turned down when you offered sex?" these *metis* were very confident of their ability to get men.

The reasons behind their success appeared to be two-fold. One was their capacity to identify MSMs – even "straight-acting ones" as put by one of the respondents. When asked how they knew someone was a MSM they would cite that they would just know – a look, the way they walked, their actions etc. Some knew the English term for it – gaydar – that is the radar that is said to enable every gay person to detect others of the same ilk.⁵⁴ It was this "gaydar" that made them so effective in their HIV/AIDS prevention and condom distribution among MSMs. And it was also this "gaydar" that helped identify potential sexual partners.

However, it was clear that another reason for the success of getting men lay in the structure of male-to-male sexuality in Nepal. An older MSM estimated that 80% of clients know that they are "drag queens" but that they still want sex and thus imagine them as "girls." He further calculated that 50% if not more of the male customers of the nightclub come specifically with the intent to have sex with men. It is in this context that one should take the response by one MSM to my question "don't you

52 The overwhelming cases of sexual violence and harassment against MSMs in Nepal are committed by police.

53 One interviewee said that he found having sex while in drag more fulfilling and exciting and relished the anonymity while in drag.

54 Hilariously one of the older MSMs declared himself to be "gaydar ko control tower ko head" - "head of the control tower for gaydar."

get found out when you have sex?” The MSM explained he would tell his partner that he was having his/her “period” and get them to have anal as opposed to vaginal sex. It is an easy and comfortable deception that works to the benefit of both parties.

Revising Sexual Categories

Initially the fact that interviewees and findings as a whole pointed to much sex taking place between men appeared to indicate the existence of a large male “homosexual” population in Nepal. However, a closer re-reading of the Boyce report and enlarging of conceptual categories point to the need for a different orientation.

The principle findings of the Boyce report included the following:

Men who have sex with men in Nepal, as elsewhere, should not be thought of as a distinct and contained target population. Men who have sex with men in Kathmandu come from across the social economic spectrum, represent all ethnic groups and are of all ages.

Male to male sex in Nepal does not exist in isolation. Rather sex between men takes place within social and sexual networks and sexual activity patterns that are intimately integrated into the sexual lives of the so-called ‘general population’ of which men who have sex with men are themselves a part.

There is no firm or conventional division in Nepal between men who have sex with men and men who have sex with women. Many men who have sex with men in Kathmandu reported that they also have sex with women, with a high percentage of men being married (Boyce 2002:5).

Important here is the fact that in contrast to media representations that insinuate a very fixed population of MSMs, (Nepal and Humagain 2009 v.s.; Lama 1998; Kathmandu Post 2003) what the Boyce report and this research makes clear is that “men who have sex with men” in Nepal, as elsewhere, should not be thought of as a distinct and contained target population. “Men who have sex with men in Kathmandu come from across the social economic spectrum, represent all ethnic groups and are of all ages” (Boyce 2002:5).

Research findings of the Boyce report, various BDS initiatives (Pant 2002 and Pant and Boyce 2001) and this study show remarkable similarities with the sexual practices occurring between men in South Asia and in the Hispanic population of the Americas (Alonso and Koreck 1993; Almaguer 1993). In the latter, as opposed to Anglo/American concepts of masculinity, in which erotic distaste towards other males and competent heterosexual behavior must be revealed, research has revealed

that men who only play the role of the “inserter” in homosexual encounters were not conceptualized as homosexuals and neither was their masculinity diminished (Alonso and Koreck 1993:115). The heterosexual identity and masculine gender of Mexican men for example, was not seen to be threatened by a homosexual act as long as they were the one to penetrate (Almaguer 1993: 259-260). The same was found true for men in Nicaragua and Mexico (Alonso and Koreck 1993). It was only the effeminate males, those who only played the passive insertee role in anal intercourse who were stigmatized for their feminine behavior.⁵⁵

The Mexican/Latin-American sexual system is based on a configuration of gender/sex/power that is articulated along the active/passive axis and organized through the scripted sexual role one plays. It highlights sexual aim – the act that one wants to perform with the person toward whom sexual activity is directed – and gives only secondary importance to the person’s gender or biological sex (Almaguer 1993: 257).

Recent research has revealed the same dynamics at play in the South Asian region (Ramakrishna et al. 2004; Kulkarni et al. 2004).⁵⁶ In South Asia, MSM behavior occurs in a gendered framework where the “real men” who penetrate the feminine *kothi/meti* do not see themselves as homosexuals or less masculine. They see themselves as being involved in a “manly activity.” It is these men who penetrate the *kothis/metis* who are the “not-man”. Construed as “feminine males” they are, as in the *jotos* or *potos* of Latin America, “passive and penetrable, like females” (Alonso and Koreck 1993). As in the Hispanic example, the fact that male-to-male sex in South Asia appears to be structured around sex roles – the penetrated and the penetrator - makes problematic such neat categories as “gay”, “homosexual” “bisexual” and “heterosexual” etc., (Kulkarni et al. 2004; Ramakrishna et al. 2004).

These findings bring to the fore several issues. One is a reminder that the emergence of the “homosexual” as a distinct category of personhood is a late-modern Western phenomenon. Secondly, the forms, meanings and social formations associated with same-sex behavior are culturally and historically contingent. And thirdly, the gendered power relations at play cannot be missed. This construction of erotic practice is premised on

55 More recent research has revealed that there was much more complexity to the “values” and “stigma” associated with being the “inserter” and “insertee” in Latin American history. See Nesvig 2001.

56 Much of the following section is taken from the Naz Foundation brochures as well as articles found on their web site. See www.nfi.net/essays.htm.

an unequal relationship, the active partner and a passive partner. The masculinity of the penetrator is not questioned. Indeed, being the “penetrator” demonstrates qualities of “autonomy, mastery, valor and virility” (Alonso and Koreck 1993: 116), the attributes of masculinity.

Such a reorientation brings into more clarity reasons behind the sheer number of sexual partners of *metis*; the regular police and army clients at the Dynasty club;⁵⁷ the ease with which *metis* interviewed picked up partners and clients; the manner in which police rape and sexually assault as well as beat up the “not-men” *metis* (Dhakai 2003; Himalayan Times 2003a, 2003b, 2003c); the verbal abuse and sexual harassment suffered by MSM condom distributors who are told by condom recipients to “now turn around and take it” (i.e. take anal sex) and the statement of one MSM that the risk of MSMs being beaten up or worse while in drag by clients and partner is actually quite low as even when drunk, they *know* what it is they came for - sex with men. Even the high rate of police and military sexual partners for *metis* makes sense in this framework, in so far as the hyper-masculinity generated by military training in all its negation of that which is feminine (Enloe 1988), is only validated by the sexual subjugation of the non-man *meti*.

Such a reorientation also makes clear the need, as stated by the Naz Foundation International, to move beyond talking of men who have sex with men (MSM) which generates a conception of MSM as an exclusive group. It is more important to talk of male to male sexual behaviors. To think of MSM as an exclusive category or “target group”, or indeed “marginal” as written in the Nepal context in the UNAIDS and the Ministry of Health, National Center for AIDs and STD control (MoH/NCASC) 2003 report, is to continue to analyze within a heterosexual-homosexual paradigm based on *identity* rather than *behavior*.

A behavior based analysis allows an understanding of why, within the penetrator and penetrated framework, *metis* are so popular. In a session with a Naz Foundation International trainer, among the responses to the question as to why men had sex with *metis*, the answer that “the anus is tighter than the vagina” was also given. Mexican “masculine men,” *jotos*, see the anus as being a site of “sexual pleasure like the vagina”(Alonso

57 In the eyes of MSMs, there was a clear difference between police and military personnel. According to one MSM army men were preferred to police men as clients and sexual partners as army men just wanted sex. Police men were more likely to beat them up, extort money as well as demand sex.

and Koreck 1993:116). Issues of sex and power are intermingled in their analysis as in Mexico “sexual intercourse (whether vaginal or anal) is not a sign of equality but instead, a sign *of* and a source of tropes *for* domination and subordination” (Alonso and Koreck 1993: 116). The very short (around 3 minutes) and violent sexual activity reported by *metis*,⁵⁸ with the penetrator and the recipient of oral sex holding the power to dictate pace and depth of penetration, are suggestive of the existence of the same dynamics at play in Nepal. As Shivananda Khan of the Naz Foundation International made clear in his presentation on stigma and discrimination at the First National MSM Consultation Meeting organized by Blue Diamond Society in 2003, in such a context, *metis* are particularly vulnerable and branded.

Metis are therefore doubly stigmatised because as biological males they are sexually penetrated – and thus not perceived as men. And their feminisation, their crossing of the gender roles and barriers accepted as social norms reinforces the stigmatisation, leading to exclusion and denial of access to services and to the social compact. And they are vulnerable because of the sexual and gender roles they play within male sexual practices which often leads to significant levels of manly partners,⁵⁹ sexual abuse, violence, rape, and harassment, often from an early age (Blue Diamond Society 2003).⁶⁰

Power and dominance in patriarchal Latin American, Indian and Nepali culture privilege men over women and the masculine over the feminine. These gendered roles aside, reasons as to why men had sex with *metis*, other than the anus being tighter than the vagina, points to larger dynamics of gendered constructions of patriarchy and sexuality and their inter-relation to the structuring of homo-erotic relations.

58 The rushed and tense nature of the interactions was evident in one MSM’s acting out of the manner in which his mouth and one hand would be furiously tearing apart a condom package, while the other hand would be stroking the penis of the client/sex partner.

59 In what appears to be a clear difference between the example of India and Nepal, a Naz Foundation International trainer highlighted the fact that *meti* equivalent *kothis* in India were made even more vulnerable because of the fact that there were four *kothis* to one client, which increased client bargaining power. When stating that this situation was probably as true for Nepal, BDS MSMs disagreed, asserting that for every one *meti* there were at least 10 clients.

60 The same stigma is borne by the *joto/putas* in Latin American. See Alonso and Koreck 1993:117-118.

Structuring Homo-sociality/Homo-eroticism in “Nepali” Culture

The list that followed the brainstorming session in BDS as to why men had sex with *metis*, took the following form: the anus is tighter than the vagina; for semen discharge and sexual pleasure; easier access to men than women; no pregnancy risks; cheaper to have sex with men than women and the opportunity to do oral sex and different sexual positions that wives were reluctant to do. In a Naz Foundation International brochure other reasons were listed including that females were difficult to access and that girls’ virginity had to be protected. This list is indicative of the manner in which clients and partners of *metis* are products of the same patriarchal system of Nepal that reinforces gendered norms of heterosexuality. In other words, dominant Nepali patriarchy has help facilitate if not produce homo-erotic relations.

Patriarchy in Nepal, as in South Asia as a whole, demands that women’s sexual and reproductive behavior be controlled. Women are regulated through the tool of sexual reputation⁶¹ “*ijjat*”, with the negative labelling of an active, desiring female sexuality and positive labelling of active male sexuality. In this context, Liechty has mapped out the contradictions that modernity holds for Nepali middle-class women negotiating the new found freedoms in post-*āndolon* Nepal (Liechty 1996). “[W]omen’s *ijjat* is a personal attribute; it is a matter of character and moral essence. Especially when it comes to marriage negotiations, a woman’s *ijjat* is like an egg shell (or hymen): once damaged it cannot be repaired” (Liechty 1996:223). Thus while men can go in public, for women to partake in this “public individuality” is to play with the social currency of *ijjat* not only at their risk, but also that of their family’s prestige/honor (Liechty 1996:216).

Where access to females is limited, where gender segregation exists, where concern over virginity remains paramount, where the social currency of *ijjat* is of vital importance, there is a culture of what Khan terms as “male homosociability and homoaffectionalism” (Khan 1995). This is as true for Nepal as it is for India. From the common place scene

61 Images of the virgin Mary in Christianity and Sita in Hinduism, to take just two examples, have formed the mainstays with which to keep women behaving in accordance to socially prescribed norms of “appropriate behavior.” Women who have taken control of their sexuality have been historically termed “loose” women – a form of “policing” by society, which along with the ever-present question of “*ijjat*” serves to control the overall and especially sexual behavior of women.

of men holding hands together in public to the sharing of beds in gender segregated households, these spheres of homosociability are enabling environments for male-to-male sexual activities (Balachandran 2004:168). Male ownership of the public sphere made “normal,” as interviewees themselves acknowledged, the scene of men spending time together, while gendered norms of “men being men” enabled them to stay out to all hours of the night as well as disappear from their homes for days at a time.⁶² Gender segregation within households results in men having to share sleeping areas together separate from women. As Khan points out,

The link between homoaffectionalism in such a homosocial environment and actual homosexual behavior is a narrow one, and many men cross this line in situations that enable the behavior to maintain its invisibility. Thus often two boys/men sharing a bed under the same blanket may find it easier to sexually touch each other without consciously acknowledging the fact. That is *maasti*. A lot of this sex is between relatives; uncles and nephew, cousins, in-laws, where space and time afford it (Khan 1995:5).

Boyce’s findings of having sexual encounters with relatives and family friends⁶³ at a young age, the opportunities cited by interviewees of sexual encounters when sharing beds with relatives and visitors, as well as the comment by one MSM of all men learning sex from other men, speaks of the same dynamics at play in Nepal, and the extent to which such activities are “unremarkable” (Boyce 2002:25) because they are the norm.

Khan makes the useful distinction in his analysis between “sex” and “*maasti*.” In a culture that demands compulsory marriage and procreation, where marriage is “seen as an essential requirement of maintaining the family, as a family duty, as a sign of obedience to the parents” (Khan 1996b:9), and where the sense of self is subsumed into a family sense of self, Khan argues that it is not surprising that “marital sex” becomes “duty” and “work” (Khan 1995: 4). With men considered “naturally lustful”, “sex for pleasure and sex as lust are often seen as synonymous” (Khan 1996b:10). Sex outside of marriage is seen not really as “sex”, but *maasti* – which Khan translates in a sexual context as being “sexual playfulness.....not seen as a serious act, because it does not involve a woman” (Khan 1996b:15). According to Khan, this *maasti* emerges as a result of sexual tensions, “body tension,”

62 This was almost always contrasted by interviewed MSMs to the example of women, and the difficulties they faced in being absent for more than 2-3 hours without being accountable to their families.

63 This is also applicable to Mexican men’s experience (Almager 1993:261).

when sexual discharge becomes urgent, when sexual arousal arises during play or body contact, when opportunities are created for sexual contact, in the dark, under the blanket, in shared beds...But this is not real sex! This is *maasti*, easily invisibilized and denied (Khan 1996a: 8-9).

Sex for pleasure is that which occurs outside of marriage and as long as it remains invisible, no shame or dishonour is brought to the family (Khan 1995: 4).⁶⁴

Khan notes that much of the “sex” in India, seen as “*maasti*, mischief, play,” was with other males, not out of desire but because women are not accessible, and because certain males are much more accessible for penetration (Khan 1999: 3-4).⁶⁵ Even though it may actually be so, sex with another male is not seen as a permanent feature, but an additional, situational and opportunistic outlet. Sex here is discharge (Khan 1995:5). In this context, “[m]ale sexual behavior is therefore not an expression of a personal identity to a large extent. Rather it is one of opportunity, accessibility and personal desire for semen discharge” (Khan 1999:5). It is for these reason that unlike in Western cities, male-to-male sex in Indian urban cultures is not limited to select and easily identifiable areas. “It is anywhere, in the right conditions, the right time, the right space” (Khan 1995: 6).⁶⁶

In Nepal, the geographical contours, the type and number of sexual partners, and the sheer enjoyment expressed, in terms of “*majjā*” (fun), seem to indicate the same dynamics of discharge and opportunity at play in male to male sex in Nepal. The number of married men reported, in both the BDS related and Thamel Gay population, makes sense in the context of the norms of compulsory marriage and procreation in Nepal, *metis* included. While not denying the existence of desire, if not expressions of personal identity, homosociability and homoaffectionalism in Nepal, conjoined with the restricted sexual access to women, appear to result in high levels of male-to-male sex based upon discharge and availability.

64 This is in contrast to Nicaragua where “the active party in a homosexual drama often gains status among his peers in precisely the same way that one derives status from seducing many women” (Almaguer 1993:257).

65 Ramakrishna et.al. (2004) provide ample empirical evidence of these dynamics in their study of the sexual behavior of street boys and male sex workers in Bangalore.

66 In this context, the “gaydar” can be said to identify not necessarily “gay” men, but men in search of *maasti/majjā*.

There are also clear economic factors at play as indicated by the citing of “cheaper rates for male as opposed to female sex worker” in the list of reasons of why men have sex with *metis*. Study findings on males selling sex to other males in India and Bangladesh cite not only the slim chances of meeting girls for men in these countries, but also lower opportunities to be able to afford a female prostitute (Khan 1997). While Liechty reports rates from Rs 15 to 15,000 per encounter for female sex workers, thereby making it difficult to pinpoint prostitution use to any one specific socioeconomic class (Liechty 2001a:63), interviews with male sex workers indicate that economics play a role in the types of clients *metis* receive.

To recall, the list of reasons why men have sex with *metis* also included “the opportunity to do oral sex and different sexual positions that wives were reluctant to do.” Liechty (2001b) has written about women and pornography in Kathmandu and the manner in which pornographic sexuality is playing an increasing role in “everyday” sexuality of the middle-class. In the juxtaposition of representations of Western/Anglo heterosexual patriarchal fantasies with local/regional patriarchal norms, it may well be that in the face of spousal reluctance/refusal to indulge in various sexual positions and activities, men and boys who see these hetero-erotic representations seek fulfillment in homo-erotic relations (Liechty personal communication). In the same vein, these initial sketches seem to suggest that the rising demand for and supply of sexual services in Kathmandu outlined by Liechty (2001a) may well be being met by homo-erotic encounters and not increased heterosexual demand.⁶⁷

Conclusion

It is clear that as in the rest of the world, a global discourse of “gay” identity is in existence in Nepal as well. The Thamel Group aside, the BDS crowd is also becoming increasingly familiar and tied to such discourses of identity as evidenced by the recent international and national lobbying undertaken to free 39 “gays and transgender people” (BBC News 2004), most of whom were from BDS. However, the findings of this initial investigation into the nature of male-to-male sexual behavior in Nepal reveals that such activities may not be so much an expression of personal identity, but one of opportunity, accessibility and

67 I thank Mark Liechty for this insight.

desire for semen discharge.⁶⁸ The categories of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” as commonly understood in the West are consequently problematic when applied to the Nepali context.

Furthermore, dominant patriarchy’s control over female sexuality and concomitant enforcement of women’s seclusion, policing of women’s *ijjat* and “compulsory heterosexuality” has an effect in the structuring of men’s sexual experience. The same dominant Nepali patriarchal system that structures, polices and reinforces gendered norms of heterosexuality simultaneously produces homo-erotic behavior. Sedgwick’s notion of “homosocial bonds” – the social bonds between persons of the same sex – charged with eroticism, but policed/controlled in order to ensure that the homosocial patriarchal order is maintained (Sedgwick 1990), appears to take more permissive forms in Nepal. Erotic contact between men continues and hegemonic masculinity, unlike in the West (Connell 1992, Bird 1996), is not defined explicitly and exclusively in heterosexual terms.

However, the production of homo-erotic behavior within dominant patriarchy occurs within the framework of naturalized masculine sexual agency, which does not serve to question the naturalness of gender and the fictions that support “compulsory heterosexuality.” A phallogocentric culture dominates, with male sexuality, malehood, masculinity and male sexual expression constructed around penetration. This research indicates that the privileging of men over women, and the privileging of the masculine over the feminine, is a dominant feature, if not cornerstone, of hegemonic patriarchy in Nepal in homo-erotic as well as heterosexual relations.

In this manner, this study’s findings are somewhat similar to the work undertaken on male same-sex behavior in prison in the US (Coggeshall 2002) and prison and labor compounds in South Africa for example (Niehaus 2002). However, it is also clear that as hinted at by the important notion of “*maasti/majjā*,” and the voluntary behavior of *metis*, it is not just simply an issue of the non-availability of women, the first-choice (cf. Khan 1999). There are indications that body, desire and pleasure are also important variables in male-to-male sexual behavior in Nepal which need to be taken seriously. As Niehaus demonstrates in his study of all male prisons and labor compounds, context becomes very important in establishing the meaning of such sexual encounters. For

68 This has clear implications for HIV/AIDS interventions which have hitherto focused on discrete, easily identifiable, “at-risk” populations such as MSM.

example, the labor compound provided a unique opportunity to realize intimacy while the prison encounters were manifestations of masculine dominance sustained by violence and fear (Niehaus 2002).⁶⁹ In Nepal, if the early age of sexual experience for *metis* hinted at the vulnerability of young boys and men within their own households, notions of “*majjā*” and the pleasures of the anus being tighter than the vagina, speak of other variables which may not necessarily prioritize a heterosexist framework of men as “the second-best alternative.” Clearly much more research analysis is required to fully understand the complex nature of male-to-male sexuality in Nepal.

If this essay can be read as an initial inquiry into “a patriarchal culture of men,”⁷⁰ it is clear that the relations between women and men in Nepal cannot really be understood without delving into male to male expressions of the same patriarchy and the various forms that masculinity takes. As Connell made clear “the study of men is as vital for gender analysis as the study of ruling classes and elites is for class analysis” (Connell 1992:736). Among others Enloe and Connell (Connell 1992, 1993, Enloe 1988, 1990), have amply shown that masculinities are not constituted in isolation. They are constituted in relation to other masculinities and femininities. Studying the nature of masculinities in Nepal⁷¹ will enable better understandings of the social production of sexualities in Nepal and their historically real forms. Such endeavors furthermore requires that we take seriously Eve Sedgwick’s statement that “[a]n understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western [read Nepali] culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of homo/heterosexual definition (Sedgwick 1990:1).

69 Coggeshall’s work reveals the same dynamics at play in a US prison, where men are seen as preoccupied with sexual gratification, and willing to obtain it at all costs. This has resulted in the creation of a “prison culture” which “perceives certain males as being trapped in between male and female, thus necessitating the relation of their true gender identities” via sexual subjugation (Coggeshall 2002: 29).

70 I thank Mark Liechty for suggesting this phrase.

71 I am well aware here of the potential political pitfalls of again highlighting “men” and “masculinity” at the expense of women. However, there is a real dearth of information on masculinities in Nepal, information that can only help us understand the structured nature of gendered order(s) in Nepal.

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