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Mapping the bisexual experience of a Keralite woman: glimpses into India

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ABSTRACT

India is not known as a country to be in for a bisexual person. Homosexual acts even within wedlock are a punishable offence in India. Legal battles over provisions in the Indian Penal Code which criminalizes any sexual act “against the order of nature” are rife. Even though Kerala has been hailed as a paradox inside India (mainly due to its human development parameters), the social, cultural and legal environment in the state is hostile to individuals who question hetero-normativity. Non-judgemental and unbiased scientific therapy or counselling are seldom available to sexual minorities. This paper is an attempt to map the experiences of a female who is openly bisexual, and is living in Kerala. An ethnographic interview was conducted where the experiences of the participant are explored, from the relationship dynamics as seen by her, to sexual experiences and difficulties in relationships. A reference is also made to the personal and social support systems that are in place for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) community in Kerala and their role in initiating discourses regarding the topic. A few pointers for future studies in the topic, especially within the context of Kerala are also put forward.

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Introduction

India has never had a composite, monolithic culture in its entire history. All aspects of its culture and the associated norms, taboos and practices have been diverse and heterogeneous. The current scenario is a bit different, with efforts on cultural unification afoot (Nandy, 1984; Sen, 1993). Views on sexuality have also followed the same pattern with variations and even stark contradictions across both time and space (Chakraborty & Thakurata, 2013).

The period of British rule also played a part in marked changes in its composite culture. Attitudes towards sexuality and morality underwent changes during this period. Perhaps, one word that could describe the attitudes towards sexuality and in particular towards bisexuality or homosexuality across time and space is “ambivalent”. There have been depictions of homosexual acts in early Indian temples and literature. Bisexuality has been a part of ancient Indian mythology as well (Doniger, 2005). However, the general attitude prevalent in the current culture is mostly negative and hostile at times, which even results

in physical attacks, detention and punishment (Feder, 2014). Homosexuality remains a punishable offence in India, though it has been a topic of stiff legal battles and wide discussions (Vora, 2014b). It is also interesting to note that only male homosexuality is covered under the purview of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalizes homosexual acts. Female homosexuality and bisexuality remain grey areas in legislative and judicial discourses and policies. The same can be said about the availability of dependable research material on the issue of female bisexuality in India (Kalra, Gupta, & Bhugra, 2010). Bisexual identity itself is developed within the confines of cultural attitudes, community factors and the gender of the individual concerned (Bradford, 2004; Dodge et al., 2016). Thus, it is imperative to probe the issue of bisexuality within the context of these factors.

Research has consistently shown that sexual minorities are at an added risk of having mental health issues when compared to the general population (Huygen, 2006). But the availability of psychotherapy or counselling to lesbian, gay or bisexual individuals in India also leaves much to be desired. Reviews on the state of psychotherapy in India are mostly silent on the specific needs of sexual minorities (Manickam, 2010; Surya & Jayaram, 1996). There is a need for academic research which can provide input into the development of effective therapy for bisexual persons, who may be at greater risk of negative mental health outcomes (Deacon, Reinke, & Viers, 1996; Parekh, 2006). The cultural taboos placed on such topics may have acted as a hindrance to the development of proper therapeutic practices suited for the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) community.

In India, instructional material on homosexuality and bisexuality (or even references to these orientations) in academic curricula are almost non-existent. Sexuality itself is not considered a topic for open discussion, either in academia or in popular culture. Therefore, openly espousing a bisexual identity is equally, if not more risky than bisexual behaviour itself. However, this is not a unique problem for India alone. This complexity and difficulty in problematizing bisexual identities and behaviour have been an important issue in other parts of the world too, with varying intensities (Alexander & Clare, 2004; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Martin, 2009). What makes India different is its unique cultural history, complex demography and volatile social-political climate.

From these premises of legal ambiguity, societal stigma, non-availability of proper therapy, lack of awareness and dearth of academic content, it can be assumed that the sizeable section of bisexual Indian women remain closeted. Many bisexual women are possibly ignorant about their own sexuality (Vora, 2014c). However, there have been commendable civil society movements which have taken up the cause of discussing queer politics in India (Dave, 2011).

Kerala, a state in the Indian Union, is different from the rest of India in many aspects. It has the highest Human Development Index among the Indian states and its population is the most literate. Some other features of the state such as its high life expectancy and favourable sex ratio place it at par with many developed nations in terms of overall progress (Dhar, 2013; Suryanarayana, Agrawal, & Prabhu, 2011). However, the state also remains traditional and orthodox in the aspects of many social outlooks and customs, with silver linings on some fronts. For example, sex education is almost absent in school curricula. Discussions on issues such as sexuality are generally denied prime time space by visual media and are mostly shunted by the print media. Remnants of a British

Victorian morality have a strong hold on the social milieu of the state (Murali, 2016). Media representation of gay, lesbian or bisexual themes are misleading at times, and often inappropriate or insufficient (Borah, 2015). Popular culture has also assumed a heteronormative position and shied away from discussing issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. Occasional experimentations through films to discuss such taboo topics as homosexuality and bisexuality (Tellis, 2016) have been mostly unsuccessful at the box office, which again acts as a hindrance to further exploration.

On the civil society front, there have been civil movements and non-governmental organizations that have focused on issues pertaining to lesbian and bisexual women in Kerala (Deepa, 2005). During the past few years, Kerala has been witnessing a slow but steady progress in terms of accepting the LGBT community to its mainstream. There have been some notable legislations including a transgender policy and announcement of free sex reassignment surgeries through government-run hospitals (Basheer, 2015). However, it is also to be noted that most of the positive action has been targeted exclusively at the transgender community, hence perpetuating the continued stigma towards non-heterosexual orientations. This exemplifies the ambivalent attitude that exists in the way Indian society in general, and Kerala in particular, is treating its sexual minorities.

Given the historical and current climate in India, the current paper is an attempt to shed some light into the experiences of living as an openly bisexual woman in Kerala. The research question was focused primarily on sexual and relationship experiences and was framed as

What are the lived sexual and relationship experiences of an openly bisexual woman in Kerala?

The primary research focus was on recording the respondent's lived experiences as a bisexual person, with regard to her current circumstances. It has already been documented that cultural attitudes towards bisexuality have an influence on the development and manifestation of identity (Bradford, 2004; Chun & Singh, 2010). Such an exploration is relevant in the specific cultural context of Kerala, which is largely hostile in its outlook towards non-heterosexual people. An ethnographic approach was taken to best understand how the experiences of the respondent have shaped her sexual life and her relationships.

Method

An in-depth ethnographic interview was conducted with the respondent, using the framework provided by Spradley (1979), which describes the ethnographic interview as close to a friendly conversation in form and conduct. It is prescribed that an ethnographic interview be composed of three elements – explicit purpose, ethnographic explanations and ethnographic questions. Ethnographic interview was chosen because of the uniqueness of the research question, which has not been previously explored in this particular social and ethnic context. Ethnography was chosen over phenomenology or case study because the focus here was equally on the role of the cultural milieu as much as it was on personal experiences, in shaping the sexual and relationship life of the respondent. The sampling was purposive and the respondent was identified through personal contacts. As described earlier, the sexual minority community in Kerala is very small and most members prefer to remain closeted due to societal pressures and the risk of various kinds of violence

(Fernandez & Gomathy, 2003). The number of openly bisexual females in a population of more than 30 million is unusually low (Menon, 2006). This necessitated confining the sample to a single respondent for this exploratory ethnographic research.

The respondent was a 29-year-old female born, brought up and living in Kerala. She works in the information technology-enabled services field as a medical transcriptionist, one of the occupational arenas that have evolved in the last two decades, with job sites located in the urban centres of the state, and clients mostly belonging to foreign countries. The respondent was married and the couple was leading a polyamorous life. Her spouse also worked in the same field. The respondent was well educated and fluent in English. Informed consent was obtained from the respondent prior to the interview.

Two iterative interviews were conducted. The interview guide for the second round was informed by the responses from the first round. The points for the second interview were identified from the gaps in the data from the first one, especially on topics related to the attitude of family and sexual encounters. The second interview was conducted two weeks after the first one. The interviews were conducted in the city where the respondent resided, as per her choice. The first interview lasted around 45 minutes and the second one, around 30 minutes. Both interviews were audio recorded after obtaining consent and transcribed for analysis. The respondent was debriefed regarding the particulars of the research study and use of interview data. Concerns regarding the confidentiality of data and personal information, and access to resulting publications were addressed. With regard to positionality, the researcher has taken an insider position to the topic, striving to apply an essentialist lens. The researcher is an activist and ally of the Kerala Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community and this may have had an influence on the contextual makeup of the interview, and overall progress of the enquiry.

Data analysis

Data from the interview transcripts were analysed thematically to uncover the latent factors of sexual and relationship experiences of the respondent, which lie behind the expressed conversations regarding her life. The themes were construed to be latent because of the nature of the themes of sexuality and sexual relationships, which are culturally considered taboo. The use of thematic analysis was justified due to its potential to fit with both the essentialist and constructivist paradigms of inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher took a more essentialist approach in this study, to benefit further explorations in the topic. This is crucial as the current study is the first of its kind to explore female bisexuality within this particular cultural context.

In the first step of analysis, the transcripts were coded by the researcher individually. The coding procedure was inspected by two experts from the field of social sciences, with experience in qualitative data analysis. The reviews were conducted independently and comments were taken for refining the coding process. The broad themes underlying the responses were identified at this initial stage. Specific categories within themes were identified in the subsequent round of coding. Comparisons and contrasts were carried out with these emergent entities. Recurring themes were marked as representing crucial experiences of the respondent. The themes thus identified are discussed in detail in the Results section.

Results

Results from the ethnographic interviews were structured into key themes. Resulting categories are not discussed specifically because of the similarity between the two; that is, there was not much to distinguish between themes and categories. This is probably because the sample was restricted to one respondent. For example, categories relating to positive emotional experiences were integrated into a single theme: happiness, pleasure and comfort. In what follows, the author presents verbatim quotations that correspond to resulting themes from the ethnographic interviews.

Issues of awareness

Awareness about bisexuality is an overarching factor across the life of a bisexual person, from the early stages of identity development, through the coming-out process and later stages of life (Greene & Croom, 2000). Awareness regarding the existence of such an orientation is lacking in the vast majority of the Indian population. The lack of proper awareness is also applicable to gays and lesbians to some extent. For those with non-heterosexual orientations, lack of awareness or knowledge regarding their own sexuality often puts them in a web of doubt, confusion and identity-related crises (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Watkins, 2013). This is reflected in the account of the research respondent. The realization that she was bisexual came only at the age of 26. Although she reported experiences of being “attracted to females” during adolescence, she tried to reason them away as mere liking or as “friendly love”. It was her spouse who reportedly educated her about the existence of bisexuality as a possible sexual orientation. On her part, the respondent considered her traditional upbringing and ignorance as reasons for the lack of awareness of her own sexuality.

Right from teenage years, I have had attraction towards many females, but that time, I did not know that it was a sexual attraction, a romantic attraction. Those days, I interpreted those attractions as “friendly love” because I was not aware what bisexuality really is.

The other aspect of awareness has to do with society in general. Many people consider bisexuality to be something weird, or as an aberration. Some consider it as another version of lesbianism. Lack of awareness can be a factor in perpetuating negative stereotypes and prejudices towards sexual orientations other than heterosexuality (Mucherah, Owino, & McCoy, 2016). Hints of this issue can be seen in the experiences of the respondent after she came-out as bisexual.

After my coming-out, some of my Facebook friends had unfriended me and some had come to my inbox asking, “Why are you acting crazy” and all. Some even asked me if I was “out hunting for prey”.

Inhibitions

Inhibitions play an important role in confining many people with non-heterosexual behaviour into “closets”. This may lead to confusion and even trauma in extreme cases (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). This problem is more pronounced in traditional societies like India, where modernization is arguably an unfinished project. The respondent expressed her reluctance to approach a prospective female partner even after coming-out and

asserting her identity as bisexual. She ascribed it, at least in part, to the moral codes and values prevalent in Indian society. The inhibitions against discussing sexuality were evident in her extended family as well, even though the family was open and accommodative of the respondent's sexual orientation and her decision to come-out.

But maybe because of the effect of the old taboos, even now I find it a bit difficult to propose a girl. I'm scared a little. You know... the society's values and all...

The family of the respondent's spouse was reportedly quite supportive of her, however, discussions on sexuality do not take place inside the family. Open discussions on sexuality are often avoided inside even progressive Indian families. This resonates with the reluctance of Indian society to discuss sexuality openly. The spouse's family, even though seemingly okay with the respondent's sexuality, was not ready to talk about it openly.

And on my spouse's family side, yeah, they know that I am bisexual. They accept me as I am, in fact, they are happy with me, they did not talk about it though; but they have seen my television appearance in a chat show, me telling openly that I am a bisexual and proud of it. They acknowledged that they saw the program, but did not talk about bisexuality. They just advise me one thing, "lead a happy life"!

Emotional experiences

Sexual activity and positive experiences related to it are a significant factor in maintaining a person's well-being (Hull, 2008). The diversity and comfort levels associated with sexual activity and resulting well-being can vary according to residence patterns. Urban residents seem to be at an advantage over rural residents in this aspect (Kirkman, Dickson-Swift, & Fox, 2015). In the case of the respondent, an important turning point of emotional experience was the realization of her own bisexual identity. Before that, she reported "confusion" was what prevailed in her own recollection of her mental state. There was reportedly big relief after the realization about her sexual identity. The respondent was able to explore her own sexuality after she became sure of her sexual identity. For example, the respondent described her first same-sex sexual encounter as "beyond words" and noted that jealousy from male partners has not been a problem, even when she participated in threesomes.

I realized that I am a bisexual after an intense sexual encounter with a common friend of me and my spouse. It was quite unexpected. We were sitting at home enjoying lunch and suddenly she asked if she could kiss me. I said "yes" without any hesitation. I already had an attraction to her, but it was not clear until that moment what it really was, and to be frank, it was all natural, I never had a thought that I was kissing a female or having any such thoughts. Eventually, that led to sex. I was so happy to know the fact that I am bisexual, rather was so excited and I just cannot describe that in sentences.

Acceptance and security

The feeling of being secure and accepted is crucial to the strengthening of one's sexual identity. There have been discussions on the importance of acceptance in the well-being of bisexual persons, for decades (Austin, 1978). Research has demonstrated marked differences in the way that verbal or non-verbal disclosure of one's non-heterosexual identity can regulate well-being (Villicana, Delucio, & Biernat, 2016), and this can also be influenced by the cultural factors prevalent in one's society. The respondent described her

primary social support system, including social media networks as largely supportive of her decision to “come-out” about her sexual identity. Her spouse’s family was reportedly supportive of her as well, even though they are reluctant to openly discuss her sexual orientation. The local lesbian community was also reportedly supportive of the respondent.

But maybe there are lesbians who think that bisexuals are not “normal”. Even in my case, I know that some of them think about me as different from them, but don’t care much about it. They are like, “okay, she is not like us, but let her be”.

His family knows that I am queer, but they never asked me about it openly. They support queer community as a whole. But open conversations on the topic never happened. They know that I am bisexual. But it is not a problem for them. It is not like I am assuming that they are okay with it, I know for sure.

Happiness, pleasure and comfort

Reference to themes related to happiness and pleasure appeared mostly in the respondent’s discussion of her sexual experiences. Coding these positive experiences as a distinct theme stemmed from the way the respondent narrated experiences of her sexual encounters and her general feelings with different intensities. She reported contentment with her sexual life and pleasurable experiences seem to have played a significant role in strengthening her experiences in the sexual and relationship realm. Sexual experiences do have a cognitive impact (Hiller, 2004), which may have long-term bearing on comfort levels and happiness. Speaking on comfort levels within threesome encounters, the respondent remarked: “They were just a world of the three of us where all of us enjoyed equally”.

The respondent spoke about positive emotions and comfort in two planes – one regarding her own experiences in relationships and the other regarding her partners’ experiences. She reported generally feeling more comfortable and “friendly” with her female partners. At the same time, the respondent shared that her best friend is also one of her male sexual partners. She made her coming-out declaration to a gay male friend of hers. There is a palpable demarcation between the sexual and social lives where the priorities and comfort levels change according to the contexts.

Discussion

The research question explored in this study was concerned with the sexual and relationship experiences of an openly bisexual woman living in Kerala, India. Ethnographic interviewing was utilized to explore these areas with a 29-year-old, married, bisexual woman who was born and raised in Kerala. Thematic analysis, assuming an essentialist stance, was utilized to process and code the interview data.

The emergent thematic understandings are not entirely in consonance with existing literature. Contrary to what is usually seen in India (Bhattacharya, 2014), the respondent was supported by her family and friends on the assertion of her bisexual identity. However, this can be explained within the class structure and the social milieu in which the respondent is placed. It can also be argued that the experience of the respondent cannot be generalized to the Indian society, which is thought to be generally homophobic (Bedi, 2011; Jupiter, 2016).

The finding that issues of awareness are central to the experiences of the respondent resonates with the continuing fight for visibility that bisexuals are currently experiencing in India (Vora, 2014a). The lack of awareness about sexual orientation that is prevalent in Indian society works at the individual level by preventing bisexual persons from understanding their own sexuality, and can add to potential confusion regarding one's identity. Patriarchal and homophobia societies, which many consider India to be, contribute to a lack of sexual awareness via stigma and the culturally sanctioned negative treatment of non-heterosexualities (Bedi, 2011). A lack of awareness and education about sexuality is one reason for the closeting of many lesbian and bisexual Indian women. The political need for acceptance of people regardless of their gender or sexual identities is still a largely unheard stance in India (Kole, 2007).

Inhibitions and homosexual experiences have been correlated in academic writing, but specific works relating bisexuality and inhibitions are rare. Moreover, the bulk of such work deals with the internalized personal inhibitions, whereas those imbued into the social structure are not discussed much. In this case, the inhibitions expressed by the respondent in the period prior to her bisexual identification and also the inhibitions of her social circle are described. Emotional experiences expressed by the participant were more on the positive side, which is an indicator of acceptance and the formation a stable identity with regard to her sexual orientation (Troiden, 1989). The respondent was most fluent while describing experiences with her female sexual partners, and repeatedly discussed her comfort while in the company of these partners. Feelings of acceptance by the primary social group or perceived social support are found to be good predictors of life satisfaction and reduced negativity among bisexual individuals (Sheets & Mohr, 2009), which are corroborated by the current findings.

The issue of coming-out and remaining closeted is a complex one, with costs and benefits attached to both. While coming-out may have positive outcomes like improved well-being and better interpersonal relationships, it may also bring social avoidance and disapproval (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). The work atmosphere can also be a significant factor in deciding whether one chooses to come-out or not (Day & Schoenrade, 1997).

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The present study was limited to a single respondent who is openly bisexual and living in Kerala, India. The findings may not be applicable to closeted bisexual females, who arguably form the majority of the bisexual population within this particular cultural context. Even within the community of openly bisexual women, these findings may not be entirely generalizable. However, this being a qualitative study, there was no attempt to focus on generalizability. Variations in experiences and interpretations may happen with changes in upbringing, social support, personal and economic independence, etc.

More studies focused on the specific issues related to the lives of bisexual individuals with larger samples are needed to form policy-specific and context-based expert opinions and recommendations to make the Indian society more inclusive. There is also a dire need to look into the lives and thought processes of closeted bisexuals and lesbians in the specific social context.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to map the sexual and relationship experiences of an Indian female bisexual respondent who is open about her sexual orientation. It can be seen from an analysis of the data that there can seldom be a one-size-fits-all model to understand the subjective sexual experiences of persons belonging to sexual minorities. There is a need to look into the complex personal, temporal and social factors at play. The need for awareness, education and strengthened support systems is evident from the study.

The implications of these findings have relevance to the academic research on bisexuality and homosexuality and the practice of relationship therapy which is mostly confined to heterosexual couples. Guidelines for the practice of counselling and psychotherapy have to be developed for India, and these findings can be useful for the same. Deliberations conducted by forums of practicing professionals on advancement of therapy can also use these findings. More research can lead to better understanding and awareness. Insights gained from persons who fall outside the boundary of heteronormativity will enrich the practice of psychotherapy, which is mostly rooted in traditional notions of family (Thomas, 2012).


Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Chinchu Chithrangathan is a Psychologist and Research Consultant with Integrated Rural Technology Centre, Palakkad, Kerala, India. He is a research scholar at the Department of Psychology, Periyar University, Salem, India and is a writer and science activist.

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