Is the Gay Community the Neo-marginalised of Modern Society?

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Body

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An examination of the sexual identity of gays through the prism of mainstream homophobic culture reveals that they are the nouveau-marginalised section of contemporary Indian society. Despite their diverse experiences the stigma is blatantly similar between homosexuals and other discriminated groups, both of whom are prejudged on the basis of their identities and are impeded from standardised interactions with mainstream society as they are made out to be "perverse" and impure.

Given the intensity of anti-gay reactions and consequent stigmatisation of homosexuals, we feel it is appropriate to refer to them as the "neo-marginalised" of the modern world. Here, we are not using neo-marginalised as a term of any great precision, such that we can rigorously and objectively assign some people to this category while excluding others. Instead, it is highly evocative of the condition of the people that we seek to write about. Homosexuals or gays, as they are colloquially known because of an established propaganda, are treated as a most degraded lot who could be considered physically, morally, socially, economically, medically, and legally untouchable. The agony of these so-called neo-marginalised is the result of both disguised and manifest attempts to reinforce the institution of untouchability on gays by heterosexual bigots. In classical times and even now, powerlessness is the attribute which defines them. They have and continue to experience the extremes of stigma.

However, it is not plausible to argue that these neo-marginalised do not resist the schemes that have come to define their conditions. Unlike in the past, homosexual individuals are now refusing to live by the generalised standards and norms of heteronormative society and are reluctant of being confined to a secluded space in mainstream culture. They assert their sexual identity with a touted preference to live a life of their choice. A definite transition is taking place. From being assigned mental disorders and sexual perversion, homosexuality has come a long way to becoming what it is today-a major issue of human rights violation. This article aims to explore how and why the stigmatisation of gays by mainstream sexual identity is a definite reflection of how the dominant narrative attempts to invisibilise the "deviant" population.

Sexual Identity

Neither gays nor the discourse that characterises their sexual identity are alien to human society. They are not inventions of the modern world. Both have always been in existence, though in embryonic and ambiguous forms and limited to the solitary domain of gays themselves. For a long time, the assertion of sexual identity remained dormant. The obscure beginnings of such assertion could be attributed to gays themselves, owing to their habitual acceptance of the "perverse sexuality" logic of the mainstream and consequent dispersion of repression.

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The advantage of contemporary times has been the speedy decline of "sexual taboos" that weighed in on homosexuality, the emergence of polymorphous sexualities, and the explosion of a candid public discourse on the question of homosexuality and gays. But the visualisation of such discourse is not without its tensions and problems. The homosexual form of gays and their manifest assertion is not welcomed by the heterosexual norm of mainstream society because of its seeming incompatibility, transgression and its phylogenetic background (Cote and Levine 2002).

However, the lack of acceptance is not unique in the formation, development, and assertion of the sexual identity of gays. But, for almost all of human history, individuals have taken to repression of their identities in order to uphold the uniqueness of the group. Here, the proposition of Erving Goffman (2009) seems valid that the persistent stigmatisation and consequent repression ironically help the sexual minority to foster a sense of identity. He further argues that "because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent" (p 74). In this context, Dennis Altman (1971) rightly argues that the hostile reactions against the fostered sense of homosexual identity are temporary because of its transient character. Therefore, Altman suggests that homosexuals should continue to seek "liberation" from their own internalised oppression. But disclosing one's sexual identity is not as easy a task as it is assumed (Eliason and Schope 2001). The phenomenon has got further complicated because of the murky calculations of the benefit (recognition) and loss (victimisation) of "coming out" and remaining "closeted" (Fassinger and Miller 1996; Schope 2004).

However, the sexual identity of gays, in a more general sense, is understood in so many ways: the biological sense, in terms of gender, social manifestations of sex, sexual orientation, etc (Gonsiorek and Weinrich 1991). But what is common in almost all ways of classifying homosexual identity is the sexuality-whether it is mental or emotional, biological or social. In this particular context of sexuality, Michel Foucault's analysis holds definite and high ground (1978). He is of the view that sexuality functioned as a sort of essence in Western society, which emerged in and after the 19th century. Since then sexuality is considered as one of our fundamental truths. He further argued that we do not choose our sexuality. On the contrary, it chooses us, shapes us, makes us who we are and yet, remains profoundly other to our rationality and civility. Foucault also claimed that sexuality must be understood as an object of epistemic investigation. It must be ensured that sexuality becomes known. In a way, he implicitly subscribes to the explanation that sexuality or sexual identity must be confessed. Sexuality of homosexuals is no exception to this rule.

Moving further, while exploring sexual formations, Judith Butler (1990) proposes an account of what she calls the "heterosexual matrix" which characterises the gender hegemonic model. She emphasises that "for bodies to cohere and make sense that there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the contemporary practice of heterosexuality" (Butler 1990: 229). She further argues that gays, despite their homosexual identity, are not radically "outside" the heterosexual matrix. To support her stand, Butler proposes that "there are structures of psychic homosexuality within heterosexual relations, and structures of psychic heterosexuality within gay and lesbian sexuality and relationships" (p 190). For her, heterosexuality is not the only expression of power but also the construction of gay and straight sexuality. It would not be wrong to assume that gays, who fall in "between" this heterosexual matrix, posed a serious challenge to the binary norms of the gender discourse.

Interestingly, while carrying forward the discourse, Ken Plummer (1975) argued that homosexuality is nothing but a social construct developed by the heterosexual majority to restrict and pathologise a sexual minority. He came out with a suggestion that this sexual minority should find acceptance and support from others within the "gay-world" (Plummer1975). Plummer has also offered theoretical explanations about the formation of gay men's identity in four stages: sensitisation, significance, coming out, and stabilisation.

Various Stages

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At this juncture, it is important to recognise that there is a plethora of stage models available to explain the formation and assertion of "homosexual minorities," most particularly gays (Coleman 1982). But it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss each of them in exhaustive detail. Our aim is to identify their core arguments with marginal reference to the various stages to suit the purpose of this article.

Vivienne Cass's (1979) analysis of homosexual identity formation through six stages is one of the most cited works in sexuality studies. She begins with the recognition that the homosexual identity of gays is very much rooted in the culture and history of Western society. To her, sexual identity "evolves out of a clustering of self-images which are linked together by the individual's idiosyncratic understanding of what characterises someone as a 'homosexual'" (p 220). However, after analysing behavioural patterns of homosexual personalities through five socio-psychological stages of identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, and identity pride, she finally argues, with a positive note, that in the sixth stage of identity synthesis, the homosexual identity of an individual brings balance and peace as his/her identity becomes more acceptable to the heterosexual mainstream; and one's sexuality no longer remains the central focus of discourse. Cass's claim, though an exceptional theory, is yet to be tested empirically.

On the other hand, Eli Coleman (1982), after presenting the five-stage model (pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationship, and integration), argues that the integration of homosexual identity with heterosexuals is not certain. But he proposes that there is every possibility of achieving more compatible relationships with potentially more satisfying social networks in the heterosexual world. In a similar study, Richard Troiden (1988) states that sexual identities-whether "homosexual" or "heterosexual"-are not natural but socially learned while interpreting the meaning of sexual feelings to themselves and society in general. After presenting his own five-stage model (spirals rather than linear, sensitisation, confusion, identity assumption and commitment), Troiden proposes that despite achieving stable sexual identities, individuals may have to remain hidden because of a homophobic social environment. In a sense, Troiden agrees that the formation of sexual identity is never fully complete to be able to identify oneself with one's sexuality in public spaces and reach self-actualisation.

However, it is seen that theorists pursuing stagist models begin with the default assumption of an individual's heterosexual identity initially, which later results in his/her full recognition of homosexual identity. The evolution of this sexual identity from the stage of self-identification to synthesis into the gay subcultures and away from mainstream culture is imperative. This is how the question of gay cultures and movements, and a multicultural outlook in the assertion of homosexual identity comes into force.

We do not intend to argue that the formation of sexual identities of the gays is generally the same in all cultural settings of the world. Sexual identities are, without a doubt, culture specific. In experience, the formation, assertion, and recognition of sexual identities varies from culture to culture and across continents. Given the cultural variance, we have confined our exploration of theoretic frameworks primarily to Western society alone. In doing so, we do not mean to treat Western culture as homogeneous. There are visible subcultural differences within the West which demonstrate completely divergent views on the question of sexual identities. We are also not denying the existence of cultural differences within gays themselves. There are a great variety of categories to which gays may belong. They can be, at the same time, European, English, black, economist, middle class, strong believer in human values, etc.

Nevertheless, one of the objects of exploring the theoretical construction of the sexual identity of gays is to understand how it actually affects them, when assertions along these lines take place. The questions are stark: are homosexuals being judged through the yardstick of "purity" and "pollution" by the dominant identity that controls mainstream cultural debates? Are there any disguised or manifest attempts to reinforce the institution of structural violence and discrimination against gays by the dominant heterosexual class? To explore the probable answer to these questions, we need to explore how untouchability defines the conditions of gays in contemporary times.

Gays as Neo-marginalised

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It is both historically and empirically established that dominant groups often try to reinforce their social values and privileges by stigmatising those whom they wish to exclude. However, this conscious stigmatisation to preserve one's domination often helps in the formation, politicisation, and mobilisation of the identity of stigmatised groups (Butler 1990). This is also true in the case of gays who are treated as stigmatised individuals. The stigmatised identity of gays has been "externally imposed by the normative and coercive institutions of psychiatry and law enforcement" (Valocchi 1999: 209). However, given the enormity of stigmatisation and persecution, many researchers shifted their attention to understand how gays are responding to their situational dilemma of being "unholy, stigmatised, impure," turning them into the neo-marginalised of modern society.

However, the social experiences of gays fit into the frame of Goffman's definitional analysis of "stigma" (2009). Gays possess, by the hostile propaganda of mainstream heterosexuals, enough abnormal attributes to disqualify them as acceptable members of civilised society. Gays are the victims of heterosexism which has been understood as "the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance" (Lorde 1984: 45). Those who do not conform to the supremacy of heterosexual orientations are mistreated, ridiculed, and abused both physically and emotionally (Brooks 2000; Savin-Williams 1998). The hostile common sense of heterosexism is evident in its expressions of "heterosexual masculinity" against gays which strongly prevents the development of intimate, emotional, and positive relationships between gay and heterosexual men (Herek 1986; Herek and Capitanio 1996). It is by the means of heterosexism that sexual hierarchies are created through which the dominant group tries to transmit binary sexual norms to shape the meaning of hetero/homo divide in the public realm (Bower 1997; Dennis 1997).

This non-acceptability of gays could be explained through the homophobic common sense paradigm, institutionalised by the ideological system of heterosexism. It is the irreconcilable conspiracies of the mainstream which have been perpetuated against the sexual orientation of gays for ages (Caramagno 2002). Theological common sense is offered with derivative scriptural proofs to disapprove the very existence of gays and their homosexual identity (Keen and Goldberg 2000; Wolkomir 2006). Moral common sense is developed to establish them as "gravely depraved" (Button et al 1997; Keen and Goldberg 2000). Socio-psychological common sense is articulated to mark them as "intrinsically disordered," "pathological" and "antithetical to natural law" (Danto 2005; Duberman 1991). With the use of medical common sense, they are declared "sick" (D'Emilio 1983; Katz 1995: 51). Legal common sense recognises the homosexual act of gays as criminal (Eskridge 1996; Keen and Goldberg 2000). Even the judicial common sense was not ready to accept gay identity as an equally valid sexual identity (Keen and Goldberg 2000; Rechy 2006).

Thus, on a general note, gays are homogenised variously as "deviant, perverse, outsider, impure, abnormal, psychopath and degraded" based on the general principle of heterosexual common sense. It is with the help of these multiple common senses that both classical and contemporaneous mainstream society secured the tacit or manifest licence to habitually tease, discriminate, harass and ostracise gays (Berrill 1992). Thus, the subjection and oppression of gays by heterosexuals could be seen as an example of "cultural imperialism" (Young 2000), "collective oppression" (Tinney 1983), and an act of misrepresentation (Pharr 1988). In the overall design, gays are reduced to, what Harry Hay call, an "oppressed minority" (Goldstein 2002). In a more generalised form, gays are caught between "social acceptance or criminality, health or pathology, liberation or retribution, connection or isolation, celebration or melancholia" (Shepard 2009).

Like other marginalised groups, gays themselves are, for long and even now in some cases, subjected to the dominant common sense by "internalising the stigma" (Crocker et al 1998; Herek et al 2007). This has also been labelled as "self stigma" (Corrigan et al 2005), "internalized heterosexism" (Szymanski and Chung 2003) and "internalized homonegativity" (Mayfield 2001; Tozer and Hayes 2004).

They carry negative perceptions about their sexual orientations and foster strong apprehensions about their non-acceptability by the "sexual mainstream" in general and their family, friends and hometown in particular (Cabaj

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2000; Smith 1997; Tasker and Golombok 1997). For long, gays have also passively accepted the repression, harassment, and stigmatisation of, and internalised, homophobia. In this particular context, the constant fear of gays of losing their family and friends to "cultural heterosexism" could be possible reasons for internalising cultural homophobia (Cabaj 2000; Greene 1997). However, the internalisations do not result in the well-being of gays; rather it adversely affects them both physically and psychologically because of its character of sexual prejudice (Bernat et al 2001; Herek and Garnets 2007).

Yet, it cannot be denied that contemporary writings, simultaneously, are responsible for demolishing mainstream common sense, myths, and misinformation about gays. For example, recent researches validate the argument that biological genetic influences contribute significantly to a gay's sexual orientation (Bailey and Benishay 1993; Bailey and Pillard 1991). There are studies which prove that gays are "physically, mentally and emotionally normal" (Friedman and Downey 1994; Gonsiorek 1991) and homosexuality is neither a psychic disorder nor a pathological one but is "natural" and always in existence throughout history (Conger 1975; Boswell 1980). Further on, the sexuality of gays, at the same time, is a morally neutral phenomenon (Gomes 1996; McNeill 1993). There are studies which prove the growing acceptability of gays among those who know them personally (Haddock et al 1993; Herek and Capitanio 1996) and they, in turn, support gay rights (Wilcox and Wolpert 2000). The findings of such research are enough to prove that preconceived notions are wrong, and that gays make a conscious "choice" to go "against the grain" of mainstream society.

Constant Stigma

Despite these positive research, homosexuals are constantly stigmatised, discriminated, and victimised in the public realms of modern societies. The classical and contemporary prevalence of stigmatisation often brings psychological stress and depression in the lives of gays (Herek et al 1999) and adolescents (Lock and Steiner 1999). Chronic depression often results in developing a sense of alienation among gays which prohibits their chances of actual, active, and equal participation in modern society (Morton 1998).

Furthermore, what adds to their existing stress is the negative attitude of heterosexual mainstream towards the children and family members of gays and the social activists who sympathise with them (Tasker and Golombok 1997). In addition, hate crimes contribute heavily to their existing psychological trauma (Mills et al 2004; Szymanski 2005) which in some cases snowballs into suicidal tendencies among them (Bagley and Tremblay 1997; Remafedi 1994).

Both historically and contemporaneously, gays have been imprisoned, hanged, witch-hunted, pilloried, whipped, confined in asylums, burned to death, excommunicated, exiled, disinherited, evicted, extorted, entrapped, censored, declared mentally ill, drugged, and subjected to castration, hormone injections, lobotomy, psychoanalysis, and aversive therapies, such as electroshock and pharmacologic shock (Amnesty International 2012; Elze 2006; HRW 2012).

It is also to be noted that gays are often blamed for inviting violence against them while the perpetrators are rarely arrested or prosecuted (Herek and Berrill 1992). As a result, violence and hate crimes against them are phenomenally increasing (FBI 2012; Herek and Sims 2008). They are humiliated routinely by having objects thrown at them and by the threat of violence and verbal public abuse from the far-right, anti-gay groups. Strikingly, in the United States, there have been more murders motivated by homophobia in 2011, than any other, since the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs began collecting data in 1998. It has been fraught with anti-gay violence: 30 fatal hate crimes were committed against gays, three more than the previous year's total (Shapiro 2012). The report states that despite increased acceptance of homosexuality, publicly and politically, the number of crimes against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people is the highest since 1998. For the first time, hate crimes against gays had outnumbered those against religion.

Heterosexual cultural assumptions about gays reinforce the high level of marginalisation and their organised exclusion from both public and private employment, thus creating economic and status inequalities (Egan et al 2008). The powerlessness of most homosexuals can be seen in their frequent experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment, in some cases legally acceptable, at their workplace (Badgett 2007; Lyons et al 2005). Discrimination at the workplace badly affects gay persons as it often results in low(er) prospects of career advancement or the denial of jobs altogether, either by the means of termination or resignation (D'Emilio 1983; Johnson 2004). In most societies, gay couples are denied leave to care for their partners, access to benefits, rights and privileges, otherwise available to married heterosexual couples, due to the absence of legal recognition of their relationships (Badgett 2007). It is certainly a denial of equal protection under the law.

The neglect of overlapping marginalisations and devaluation of diversities observed among gay experiences and identities, depending upon age, gender, race, class and religious affiliation, is alarming (Greene and Boyd-Franklin 1996). For example, "black gays" are more marginalised than "white gays" (Krieger and Sidney 1997). In many situations, gays are also obstructed from religious places of worship by religious bigots (Lewis and Rogers 1999; Wilcox and Wolpert 2000). In some cases, the non-acceptability and the consequent fear psychosis often pushes homosexuals to leave their homes to live on the streets (Ray 2006). Such homelessness often leads them to fall into drug use and risky sexual behaviour, which further results in mental health disorders (Cochran et al 2002).

Most importantly, the issues and concerns of gays are overlooked in all sectors of education particularly health education, social studies, and other curricula. Gay students are not only treated with disdain by so-called "normal" fellow students but also by institutional policies and norms which are highly discriminatory (Johnson and Lugg 2011). They often miss out on education because of the lack of social support. Anti-gay attitudes are reflected in scholarship programmes as gay students are deliberately barred from applying or receiving financial assistance (Severson 2013). They are often denied sexual health information related to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The homophobic attitude of teachers and non-teaching staff affects their academic exercise terribly (Brus 2009). As a consequence, gays are placed at the lower rungs of society and may have greater chances of remaining at a lower level even in the future.

In various circumstances, the role of the media adds to the devastating anxiety of homosexuals. The prejudice of the media is reflected in their frequent denial of airing positive gay content (Brewer 2008; Gross 2012) and stereotyping gays as "sexually obsessed," "finger-snapping," "wig-wearing," etc (Jones and Hill 1996). In this particular context, there are studies which exclusively focus on how the media shapes and redefines the truth about sexuality which is eventually non-beneficial to gays (Gamson 2005; Walters 2001). Similarly, the Internet is filled with anti-gay quotes, proverbs, idioms, phrases, slangs, abuses, anecdotes, and stories.

Conclusions

Much has been written and done to expose the stigmatisation, discrimination and victimisation of gays in the last three decades. The growing positive discourse on sexual identity is also a great encouragement to gays to gain social recognition and public visibility. But the paradox is that despite the ensuing progressive discourse and wide visibility of gays, the radicalisation of anti-gay attitudes, discrimination and crimes have followed at unprecedented rates. Both gays and anti-gay movements have parallely gained speedy momentum.

In our overall assessment, gays are not able to gain a dignified status despite their incessant struggle to be integrated with the larger society. Homophobic violence against them is still a living practice. Gays are still counted as stigmatised. They are still being defined through the perverse dichotomy of purity-pollution perpetuated by the heterosexual mainstream. Yet, gays are moving beyond stereotypes despite the structural disabilities imposed on them by the dominant culture.

For example, even now, homosexuals are discriminated against by the Indian Penal Code. Section 377 delegitimises the sexual identity of gays by criminalising sexual activities that are "against the order of nature." In

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2009, the High Court of Delhi decriminalised this section allowing for sexual intercourse between all consenting adults. However, in December 2013, this judgment was overturned by the Supreme Court stating that the repeal of Section 377 was in the domain of the legislature, and not the judiciary, thus carving out another crusade for homosexuals in India: the battle for legal acceptance of gay identity.

While establishing a connection, we do not intend to argue that gays and other marginalised groups resemble each other completely. The situational contexts of all groups are inherently different. It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with this analysis exhaustively, while comprehending the social roots of marginalisation. First, other marginalised groups, such as women, Dalits, and Adivasis in India and the black community in the Western world, are stigmatised because of their birth in "degraded families" while gays have to experience stigma only after the disclosure of their sexual orientation. Second, still other groups are treated as impure or polluted because of a theological construction and menial tasks they are assigned to perform, whereas gays are also subject to similar treatment albeit on account of their so-called deviance from the heteronormative logic. But, both differ in terms of their historic experience of identity formation. Third, the identity of women is suspended in the gaps of the public/private dichotomy, and the untouchables are always visible but forced to live on the periphery of society. Gays, for a long time, were entirely invisible. Fourth, gays are oppressed by the systemic existence of oppositional hierarchies, created along the homo/hetero divide. Fifth, the sexual identity of gays is individual-centric. The family to which he is born will not be labelled as a sexually deviant family. A gay joins the community of gays only when he discovers his different sexual orientation. Sixth, gays are far ahead of other marginalised groups on the scale of socio-economic status measured in terms of income, education and occupation. Lastly, the concerns of other marginalised groups, such as women, Dalits, and Adivasis are all legally protected in India while gays are still struggling to get their concerns legally recognised.

One may rightly ask what is the need for comparison when all marginalised groups are strikingly different in the ways that they perceive their identities. Here, we argue that differences between the various groups do not obliterate the strong similarities in terms of treatment they receive from their respective oppositional and dominant cultural groups. They are all highly stigmatised, culturally-excluded, socially segregated, emotionally repressed, misrepresented, politically marginalised, economically deprived, physically victimised, and frequently terrorised in their respective domains. They are all "untouchables," per se. With rising consciousness, all these groups are now asserting their "marginalised" identities. But the visibility and verbalisation of identity, gays and the institutionalised anti-gay reactions are becoming modern in character. We, therefore, identify them as the "neo-marginalised" of modern society.

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