

Psychosocial Roots of Stigma of Homosexuality and Its Impact on the Lives of Sexual Minorities in India

Sanchita Srivastava*, Purnima Singh

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, New Delhi, India
Email: *sanchitasrivastava@hotmail.com, purnima125@hotmail.com

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Abstract

The present study examined the factors related to the negative attitude of society towards sexual minorities living in India. This study also explored further the impact of such stigmatization and carrying homosexual identity on the lives of lesbian and gay individuals. To fulfill the objectives, two studies were conducted. Study 1 included 24 heterosexuals and this study scrutinized the societal perspective regarding homosexuality and attitude towards it. Results showed that homosexuality is a strong stigma in India. The results further provided factors responsible for the prevalence of negative attitudes towards homosexuality. Study 2 included 34 sexual minorities (gay & lesbian) and explored the impact of stigmatization on their lives. It also demonstrated the adverse effect of the stigma on the lives and wellbeing of the sexual minorities. The present paper provides an exhaustive theoretical and empirical underpinning of the development and existence of the stigma of homosexuality in Indian society. The results have implications for understanding and mitigating stigma in various walks of life.

Keywords

Stigma, Sexual Minority, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender), India

1. Introduction

Homosexuality is a social stigma which is still prevalent in many countries including India. Indian society which is considered to be traditional and collective in many ways is also not impervious to this difference among humans. Today the society is experiencing changes in traditional cultural values, customs and mindsets; despite this the mindset about homosexuality is still ambiguous and the society today seems to be at the crossroads. In

*Corresponding author.

traditional Indian society, public discussions on sexuality as well as sexual preferences are still a taboo. People feel hesitant to talk about sex education, sexual practices, and preventive means etc. Though heterosexuality is well accepted in the society, but still people do not feel comfortable to discuss it openly. In such a scenario expecting understanding and acceptance of homosexuality is difficult. Of late however, the society is opening up and becoming somewhat liberal mostly in urban and metropolitan areas. Changes in Indian law in past few years from decriminalizing the IPC 377 (the law under Indian Penal Code which considered carnal sexual intercourse as a criminal offence) and then recriminalizing the same had initiated the changes in Indian value system. But the most important questions are: has it really changed the stigma of homosexuality in India? Is it really breaking the barriers between the sexual minorities and heterosexual society? And most importantly the impact of family, societal values and norms on the lives of sexual minorities is needed to be explored. The present study is an attempt to examine the psychosocial factors responsible for the existence of such stigma in Indian society. This paper had focused on two main issues, first the attitude of heterosexuals towards sexual minorities in the context of changing scenario of homosexuality in contemporary Indian society. Secondly it examined the repercussions of carrying a stigmatized identity in case of gay and lesbian individuals living in contemporary India.

1.1. Social Stigma of Homosexuality

People experience detrimental consequences of carrying a stigmatized identity e.g. stigma based on one's race, body weight, mental illness and sexual orientation. By definition social stigma has been depicted by Goffman (1963) as a "mark" which signifies the individual membership of a particular group or set of presumed characteristics which is socially devalued [1]. One thing which is highlighted by Crocker, Major, & Steele (1998) is its situational and context specific nature [2]. Though there are many stigmas exist almost in every culture and society but there are many stigmas which are context specific and culture specific. Stangor and Crandall (2003) also talked about the social construction of stigma and showed the significance of cultural context as they mentioned, "*what is stigmatizing varies both across and within cultures, as well as across time within a culture*" (p. 65) [3]. Herek (1991) had found strong role of prevalent stereotypes and cultural ideologies in shaping stigma against homosexuals in United States [4]. Lin and Lin (1981) had attempted to link homosexuality with family and group values [5]. Different societies have different reasoning for stigmatizing sexual minorities. Like homosexuality can be stigmatized by perceiving it wrong choice or a threat to particular religion or norms of the society [3]. Indian culture has been linked with affirmative perception of homosexuality by many authors in literature [6]. However, the studies aimed to explore reasons for stigma against sexual minorities in contemporary India are scant. This paper attempts to provide a framework of the psycho-social roots of stigma against sexual minorities in Indian society. Though homosexuality has been legalized in many parts of the world, however the stigmatization and negative attitude against sexual minorities continued to exist.

1.2. Negative Attitude towards Homosexuality

Studies suggest that attitude towards homosexuality and sexual minorities is not favorable and in fact most societies stigmatize homosexuals. This negative attitude can be influenced by the religious and societal norms against homosexuality which considered it a forbidden act [7]. Earlier it had been classified as a disease/disorder in DSM and ICD classification. Herek (1988) explored the factors associated with negative attitude towards homosexual individuals [8]. Religious involvement was found to be one of the prime reasons for negative attitude towards sexual minorities [9]. Studies have also shown that heterosexuals shown disgust and anger response towards sexual minorities [10]. Studies have also found linkages between masculinity and negative attitude towards homosexuals [11]. These studies have shown some of the reasons and responses towards sexual minorities however the attitude towards sexual minorities in India is not explored much. The reports documented by NGO reports and newspaper reports clearly depict the negative attitude towards sexual minorities in India [12]. Though past changes in law (abolishment of IPC 377) and media attention being given that they have a distinct identity, discussions about these issues in public has started happening. The recent incident of using "corrective rape therapy" in India depicts the present negative status of homosexuals in India [13]. In the light of these facts it is imperative to examine the factors associated in the development in attitude formation of heterosexuals about homosexual population.

1.3. Repercussions of Living with the Stigma of Homosexuality

Researches in the west showed that homosexual people are always target of victimization [14]. People with ho-

homosexual identity experience bullying, verbal and physical abuse, and hate crimes [15] [16]. Lots of bullying happens in school and college level due to the sexual identity of LGBT people in most part of world. As a consequence they are either being killed or they commit suicide [17] [18]. It also leads to school dropout, poor attendance, poor performance and high mental health problems amongst LGBT students [17]. On the other hand it increase stress and make them vulnerable to mental disorders [19] [20]. This negative reaction from the society does not only affect their health but also affect the individuals self perception such as low self-esteem [21]. The review show that numerous studies reported that sexual minorities suffer from various negative consequences. However, studies lack data based on India sample. There is a special need to study the stigma experiences and its impact on the lives of sexual minorities in India in the context of constant change in Indian legal system and increased visibility of sexual minorities in various parts of India in forms of pride parades.

2. Objective of Study 1

Two studies have been conducted to explore the factors associated with stigma of homosexuality and its impact on the lives of sexual minorities. The purpose of the study 1 was to find out the attitude of the heterosexuals towards the homosexuals and it also intended to find out the factors contributed to such attitude formation.

2.1 Method

2.1.1. Participants

24 heterosexuals (Male = 12, Female = 12) participated in the study. Participants belonged to different parts of India but presently all of them were living in Delhi. The age range was 17 to 34 yrs (Male = 17 to 34 yrs, Female = 19 to 29 yrs). All the participants were receiving high education from a premier institute of India.

2.1.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited through random sampling method. After taking their consent, participants were asked about the demographic information (age, socio-economic status, educational qualifications). Participants were assured about their confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews were taken with an average of 40 - 50 minutes. Participants were asked the key questions related to their awareness of the concept of homosexuality, existence of homosexuals in India, their perception about homosexuality, reasons for the existence of homosexuality and to what extent they may share a relationship with any homosexual individual.

3. Results of Study 1

All the interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis [22] technique was used to indentify common themes in each interview. The following themes were emerged.

3.1. Ambivalence towards Homosexuality

The most common response of all the participants was the discomfort towards the discussion on homosexuality and sexual minorities in India. They were not comfortable about being interviewed about homosexuality however they had given prior consent for the interview on it. Few participants had directly opposed homosexuality, while others showed tolerance towards it. Another important response given by most of the participants were the unwillingness to talk and meet homosexual individual and also showed "mild homophobic" reactions (Fear and Disgust) towards them. Some of the participants also rejected the possibility of homosexual individual as their family member. The reactions of most of the participants represented the poor acceptance of homosexuality among Indian people.

3.2. Influence of Socio-Cultural Context: It Is against Marriage Institution

Several factors were identified under this theme. One of the significant factors that influenced the mindsets of these heterosexuals was the social systems and institutions of Indian society. The social systems, norms and traditions directly or indirectly promote heterosexuality. These institutions like heterosexual marriage made participants think that homosexuality is unnatural as it is not supported by social norms and institutions. Participants also perceived it anti-normative or against societal values. Another reason to show avoidance towards them and willingness to ostracize homosexuals was lack of knowledge about the concept. Participants were also uncertain

about their actual interaction with homosexuals. Some of them perceive it contagious in nature and they fear to get affected by the homosexual person's lifestyle. Some of them perceived it "immoral" as it was against their moral principles practices in society. These practices were largely perceived as threat to the Indian social system and against the welfare of the society. Most of the participants perceived homosexuality against the conventional gender role. As most of them perceived heterosexuality and gender as the two faces of the same coin.

3.3. Homosexuality Is Right or Wrong: Willingness to Treat Homosexuality

Most of the participants though perceive homosexuality wrong but did not consider it equivalent to crime. Some of the participants perceive sexual orientation as biological process but still insisted that homosexual should not chose to be so. Participants were also like to try their level best to get homosexuals treated so that this problem would be resolved. Most of the respondents believed that homosexuality is a psychological disorder and that it can be treated.

3.4. Extent of Relationships with Homosexual People: Tolerance for Friendship But Not as Family member

Most of the participants showed tolerance in terms of friendship with homosexuals. However, they were not ready to accept their family members as homosexuals. Participants were comfortable to maintain a distant relationship with their homosexual friend but they were not at all comfortable when it came to family. Participants told that they would like to try their level best to turn their homosexual family member back to "normal" (heterosexual was perceived as normal). Most of the participants showed fear of being associated with homosexual and labeled as homosexuals. Participants' also perceived homosexuality as a byproduct of unsatisfied need of love and affection from family. They also perceive same sex relation as compensation of love and affection not received from their mother or father.

4. Objective of Study 2

The objective of the study was to examine the experiences of sexual minorities living with stigmatized identity and its impact on their life and wellbeing. This study also explored the best possible coping mechanism used by the participants.

4.1. Method

4.2. Participants

Total 34 self-identified homosexual individuals (Lesbian = 15 and Gay = 19) participated in the study. Age range was 17 to 42 yrs. Participants from major cities like Delhi and Kolkata were participated. The participants were mostly working in different organization like IT sector, health, NGOs, fashion industry, and some were pursuing different professional courses like engineering, management, social work etc.

4.3. Procedure

Snowball sampling method was used for recruiting participants. They were contacted through email groups, social networking sites and phone. After the informed consent the interviews were taken. The interviews were semi-structured and around 1 and half hours was an average time for each interview session. Participants were explained the purpose of the research and they were asked the key questions relating to the direct and indirect stigma experiences, coping with stigma and its impact on their life and wellbeing.

5. Results

Thematic analysis had been used to analyze the interviews. Major common themes emerged from the interviews are as follows:

5.1. Stigma Experiences

Most of the participants reported that they experienced negative reactions from others and expected stigmatiza-

tion due to their sexual orientation. They expected devaluation and perceived inferior status in society. Most of the participants disclosed their sexual identity either to their parents or close friends/significant others or to both. Most of the participants were rejected by their parents. Similarly, those who are out to others experienced negative reactions from them such as they were called names, made fun of and rejected by them.

5.1.1. Negative Attitude of Heterosexuals

Most of the participants who were out to their family and friends expressed that there were factors which blocked the path of their acceptance from family and society. The common factors experiences by most of the participants were homosexuality was perceived as anti-normative, unnatural, influence of bad spirit, psychological disorder and lack of understanding and knowledge about homosexuality. They received negative reaction from most of the people in society.

For example a gay participant shared:

"...I am a lawyer by profession, and a treasurer of lawyer association but after pride parade my photo had come in a newspaper and people got to know and they distributed my photo in whole court and lawyer fraternity with a note that I am gay to harass me. I got upset and disappointed for some time..."

Similarly a lesbian participant also shared:

"...my life style was not acceptable to them because everybody was settled. And when my contract was about to over I expected renewal. But I didn't get. And my HR told me that the boss is not happy with my lifestyle. Then I asked him what was the problem with me? I asked does he have a problem that I am gay? Then my HR said yes! Then my HR said that if you like girls why don't you go for sex change. It was a wired question. And they were making fun of me. And I heard from my colleague and I was very much disappointed..."

5.1.2. Negative Reaction of Family Increases Stigma

All other participants who were out to their parents were rejected, ostracized, and pressurized to behave like heterosexuals and few were verbally used. The expected negative reaction from parents was the main reason for choosing to remain closeted. Those who did not listen to their parents were totally abandoned by them.

A lesbian participant told that she suffered after disclosing her sexual orientation to her family:

"...my father said I will be sent to some other place for job now you won't live in Kolkata. Then I said ok I am ready to go but on one criteria that you will never ask me for marriage. Then I left Kolkata and went to another city but there was all together a different story they abducted me and forced me for marriage and made all the arrangement for marriage. I somehow managed to escaped then for almost 5 - 1/2 year there was no contact between me and my family. After all these incidences I developed a disease called "psychoasma" it has symptoms like asthma that when I experience acute stress I can't breath. So once I was hospitalized due to it and hospital people tried to contacted my family but they replied that they are not interested in me and any news regarding me..."

5.2. Unsupported Law and Social Systems

Most of the participants expressed the strong need for social recognition. The existing social institutions are heteronormative and this created obstacle for family to accept themselves with their sexual orientation. The verbatim given below show the legal and social barrier against acceptance.

A gay participant told:

"...My parents have fear from society that certain relationship does not have recognition from society. Even if you get partner in your life. Till date you have relations and till date you are single now so what's beyond that? We want to see you have family, we want to see you very happy. But still you are single. That provides an apprehension for me and I could not provide a proper answer to them. Even if I have a stable relation I don't have anything to bind that relation, recognition to the relation but that's empty. its somehow or the other I would love be recognized my partner or vis-a-vis. we have questions like if something is happened to me what will happen to my partner? Whatever we have put together or earned nobody is going to recognize that. There is no way to recognize the family we make or we can't adopt a child. There is no next generation we can't call someone our child..."

Similarly a lesbian participant also shared:

"...heterosexuals by default finds expression where can fit in. but as a homosexual person, I am in the clo-

seted because I can't express myself completely. It can label myself and the labeling is not like lesbian mean that I am going to sleep with women, it is called a relationship and the relationship in general find expression in many more aspect of life. Similarly, my lesbian relationship can be find in many aspect of life but there is no recognition...

5.3. Coping with Stigma

The most valued support system was found to be their parental acceptance for their sexual orientation. The acceptance mitigated their stigma experiences. However, those who were rejected by their parents experience were exposed to harsher stigmatization as mentioned in the theme above. Surprisingly internet was found to be an effective support system by all the participants. After social networking sites, the most important factor which helped them in fighting against the stigma was the support of the LGBT community.

5.3.1. Attitude of Parents towards Homosexuality

Those participants who were accepted by their parents experienced very less self stigma and found courage to face public stigma given by the society.

For example a gay participant told that his family has accepted him very nicely and that gives him not only happiness but also encouraged to tell about his sexual identity to others confidently.

"...when I told my mom I was astonished to see the reaction of her, the first word came out from her mouth was, "who is he?" my father reaction was its ok now I was wondering it is written in your kundali (Horoscope) that either you have a unhappy married life or you won't have. I understand it now... there are other people who knows things but we don't talk about it. Its about mutual understanding. I am comfortable with my relatives because i think they know about it but something they don't talk. My straights are comfortable with me... the freedom to choose to come out is totally dependent of the family environment and support..."

A lesbian participant also added a similar experience:

"...the fact is that I never felt discriminated against. Few days back I just asked him dad if tomorrow I tell you that I am gay what would you say, would you disinherit me or would you stop loving me...he didn't give me a concrete answer but he shrugged his shoulders and say how does it affect our relation..."

5.3.2. Role of LGBT Community

Friends in most of cases showed either positive or tolerant behavior towards their sexual identity. The support from LGBT community helped them not only to survive from parental rejection and social stigma but also provided confidence to accept themselves with comfort and ease.

A gay participant told the strong support given by LGBT community:

"...I got to know that there was an organization related to same sax people. I posted a letter on the given post box address. After sometime I got an invitation to attend a meeting. I went there then I got to many people like me. They also have interest in boys and after meeting them the loneliness in life was gone. That was my first step to LGBT organization. I am very lucky to have good mentors and friends with whom I shared my life problems and then I decided to work for them and I am working till date..."

A lesbian participant talked about her own story for being a support group for many LBT individuals:

"...we thought we have to form a group and we have to search thing that's a huge story. We took so many risk at that point of time, we both were government employee and 377 was still there and we dared to give interview to Hindustan times as lesbian couples. In a most popular Bengali newspaper. They published a post box number and that time there was no women group. After that we got more than 400 letters and out of them 85 were written by women/female. Then in a process we meet few women and 6 of us form Sappho. We took so much risk. We had so many stories of violence so we thought we have to do something. We developed network and help others..."

5.3.3. Internet, Online Support Groups and LGBT Literature

Those who are not out publicly are having friends in social networking sites. The internet has not only given them social support but also helped them in finding their own sexual identity. Most participants told that internet was the immediate remedy for their stigmatized experiences. Those who were not exposed to internet earlier in their life when they were in the process of understanding their sexual orientation felt lonely and depressed due to

lack of knowledge and support from people like them.

A gay participant shared the strong impact of internet and LGBT literature in his life:

"...were articles and new papers I was searching for them to find my identity and i found that there was an article telling that we are born in this way. After when I passed 10th I joined some dating sites and after a long research I came to know that..."

A lesbian participant shared the significance of internet in her life:

"...I think access to internet is very important. Because otherwise there are no channels. Of course you have these small towns where there is no internet but still people manage somehow. Whether they have meet up in parks. But the things is that where ever internet is available people express themselves there. I am here today because I have profile in FB and i met people there. If my social networking were zero I would have never met people. It is only 1% of chance in the real life where you find someone actually who says ok lets discuss. it is only internet where you start actually opening up..."

5.4. Stigma and Wellbeing

Most of the participants experience either direct stigmatization or aware of others negative attitude towards homosexuality. These negative experiences may have repercussions on their wellbeing. The role of parents support and acceptance perceived to be significant in reducing stigma as the earlier theme had mentioned. However, the need for support and acceptance and the constant pressure to hide one's sexual orientation create stress among these participants. This excessive stress and distress make them susceptible to various mental health consequences.

A gay participant told that his parents have negative attitude towards homosexuality, he sincerely lacks the support and opportunities for sharing:

"...you feel need to find people like you. Who can understand you. These feelings actually affect your studies, when you are not letting out something out of your mind and not telling anyone. It affect your studies because there is always an urge to talk to them. Even a small things. I could not sleep in the night it is all the time lingering in my mind. I always try to keep myself busy so that I could stop my mind to think about it. I hardly sleep for 2 hrs in a day. I used have nightmares about my homosexuality..."

Another gay participant also told that acting as straight makes him stressful as he told:

"...I feel scared while acting as straight because you are not true... You can't even talk openly and fearlessly. because you think that you may get caught. You have be very alert all the time... You body language and everything...It is really strenuous.

6. General Discussion

This paper attempted to answer the question that "why is homosexuality existed and not accepted in Indian society". Based on the results discussed in both the studies several reasons can be delineated. It is a direct threat to the worldviews of the society. The society directly and indirectly has given approval to heterosexuality as natural which strengthens the perception of homosexuality as a social stigma. Social stigma is formed by a social process and it is subjective to change in context and time. Since homosexuality is also a kind of stigma which has existed since a long time and also been changing its meaning and attitudes due to the social, legal and political changes (Herek, 2009). In the Indian society which is both a traditional society and a collectivistic one people are more bound to social and cultural norms. Participants in study 1 and study 2 attributed the existence of homosexuality stigma as a reason to it being against law or unsupported by law. Most of heterosexual participants were not against homosexuality due its pervious criminalized status. Some participants even didn't know before the decriminalization of IPC 377 that homosexuality was considered as crime in India. They are against it since they perceive it as unnatural and morally polluting act rather than a choice of sexual orientation.

In west, the religious worldviews play a very strong role in the social construction of homosexuality as a negative and devalued social identity. The results of both the studies in this paper suggest a different picture. The role of family especially parents are found to be important for the existence of stigma. In the west where social exclusion is primarily seen at the level of family, friends and also at government policy level but in Indian culture the exclusion is perceived as an extreme form of social rejection. Few homosexual participants in Study 2 expressed that some family excluded them and most of the other participants were pressurized to live their lives like heterosexuals and change their orientation as soon as possible. Similarly in study 1 heterosexual participants

also showed their rejection towards accepting a homosexual family member but ready to convert their family member into heterosexual. The recent incidence of “corrective rape therapy” exercised by some of the parents in India showed the extent of negative impact can be experienced by any homosexual individual [13].

One important factor which came out from study 1 and study 2 is that people both heterosexuals and homosexuals were the role of family and social values. The Indian society is by and large a collective society where family values and society plays very important role in individual’s life. The difference between west and Indian society is terms of family and parental values role and these affect the coming out process. In traditional Indian family a child is considered to be responsible to his/her parents. The respect towards parents restricts them to discuss their sexuality before their parents. This creates suffocating environment and leads to unpleasant consequences for individuals’ with different sexual identity. Though society is changing but these changes are in a transition phase. The society is experiencing mixed responses towards the acceptance of an alternative sexual identity (LGBT identity).

Another important factor found to be important and common in both the studies is the coping mechanism in the form of parental and LGBT community support. Study 2 showed the significance of parental acceptance. This acceptance provided them confidence to deal with the stigmatization based on their sexual orientation. However the role of LGBT community support had a significance place in the lives of all the homosexual participants. The community support not only helped to fight with their stigma but also helped them to understand and accept themselves. This paper explored the factors responsible for stigma against homosexuality and also examined the linkage between stigma experiences and their wellbeing. Study 2 showed that parental rejection increased their stigma experiences and lack of support from parents make them vulnerable to mental health consequences. Similarly the distress and continuous anxiousness due to posing as heterosexual may have repercussions to their satisfaction with life and mental health.

7. Conclusion

One of the major factors which are important for the existence of stigma is parental reaction towards homosexuality. Participants in both the studies have shown friendship with homosexual individual is somewhat accepted. These results support the contact hypothesis [23]. More contact led to greater understanding of the other’s situation. Future research should look into the factors which facilitate contact and the level of contact which would facilitate acceptance of homosexuals in India. The positive role of LGBT community support supports the existing literature in the west [24]; however the significance of parental acceptance in collectivistic society like India is need to be explored further with bigger sample size.

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