

Being A 'Kothi': An Ethnographic Interrogation with A Male Transgender in Kolkata, India

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Abstract: *The present paper gives light on a self-disclosed male transgender locally known as 'Kothi' from Kolkata in India. Data have been collected from two brief interviews held with an interval. The researcher, who is also the storyteller and narrative analyst, is responsible for the story structure by locating central themes, sequencing life events, and organizing the time span. The focus includes the self-perceptions of an individual male transgender, his sexual orientation and relationships, and the manner in which he lives his 'other' gendered life in a hegemonic hetero-normative society. While this case is obviously not representative of all transgender of India, it does briefly illustrate the kinds of experiences that confront a male transgender. The narratives also indicate how the expression of a gender variance can sustain and resist in an apparently closed system.*

Key words- *Transgender, Kothi, Sexuality, Sexual behaviour.*

I. Introduction

The present ethnographic research is on a self-disclosed male transgender¹ locally termed as "Kothi"² in Kolkata, India. The study is based on two brief ethnographic interviews held with an interval of six years. The first interview was held in the year 2006. That time I was doing MSc in Anthropology. I had chosen the topic of Gender Sexuality and HIV/AIDS as my dissertation. The selection of the topic was fueled by a rally which I had observed in the month of June of that year, held by a group of male transgender and homosexuals on the open busy road of Kolkata metropolis, India. I have felt interest to know them and their lives. During that time I had met Babul, a transgender boy, who also self acknowledged himself as Kothi. He had agreed to share his experiences with me face to face. The present report is particularly focusing only his life while the case is very sensitive and common to other transgender of Kolkata. The Babul's story certainly not to be taken as wholly typical and does provide rare perceptions into the life of a transgender in India. This ethnographic narrative contextualizes biographical material within the political realities of the culture in which Babul functions. It is hoped that this brief ethnographic data also states those convoluted facts and covered experiences of living as a transgender homosexual in contemporary India.

II. Sketch Out Of Background Study

In the late 1990s transgenderism emerged as a significant research topic, with long-term research projects carried out by ethnographers in countries such as Brazil (Kulick 1998), Philippines (Johnson 1997), Tonga (Besnier 1997), and among Native Americans (Lang 1998). Major work on transgender theory and practice includes Feinberg 1996 and 1998; Ekins and King 1997; Bornstein 1994 and Atkins 1998. Though Sexuality research was gradually incorporated as a serious research concern since Ellis' (1897/1923) path breaking work on sexual variation and Freud's (1905/1964a) documentation of the nuances and contradictions of desire. Among the early ethnographers B. Malinowski³, M. Mead⁴, G. Devereux⁵, W. Hill⁶, R. Landes⁷, Van

1 In contemporary usage, "transgender" has become an umbrella term that is used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences, including but not limited to: pre-operative, post-operative and non-operative transsexual people (who strongly identify with the gender opposite to their biological sex); male and female 'cross-dressers' (sometimes referred to as "transvestites", "drag queens", or "drag kings"); and men and women, regardless of sexual orientation, whose appearance or characteristics are perceived to be genderatypical. A male-to-female transgender person is referred to as 'transgender woman' and a female-to-male transgender person, as 'transgender man'. (UNDP 2010). In India, people with a wide range of transgender-related identities, cultures, or experiences exist, Kothi is one of them.

2 Kothi is a situational local category within the fold of MSM (male having sex with male) in West Bengal. They are the effeminate males, have sex with the 'real' straight man. They play the role of insertee in sexual penetrative act.

3 Malinowski in his studies of Trobriand Islanders between 1915 and 1918 documented various forms of sexuality.

Baal⁸ reported various substantive forms and practices of sexuality. Subsequent to Kinsey's (1948, 1953) sex survey, Ford and Beach (1951)⁹ found the diverse articulations of sexuality around the question sex and / or gender. With regard to human homosexuality, they found that the male form of homosexuality was widespread¹⁰. Responding to the continued lack of ethnographic attention paid to homosexuality, Sonenschein challenged the scholarly community with his essay, "Homosexuality as a Subject of Anthropological Inquiry" (1966)¹¹. Rubin's (1975) anthropological work on sex and gender of cultural and political analysis, Gagnon and Simon's (1973) revolutionary studies, the study on transgendered prostitutes in Oman (Wikan 1977) and later Vance's (1991) anthropological reviews of the same may be associated with a series of similar anthropological confirmations of a wide diversity of same-sex issues¹². They also addressed sexuality and gender as the cultural phenomena, e.g. berdache¹³ or xaniths¹⁴, female husbands¹⁵, "boy inseminating rituals"¹⁶, "age-structured sexuality"¹⁷ or different other forms¹⁸, Hijra¹⁹. Many recent works thoroughly documented the presence of diverse expressions of same-sex sexuality in African traditional societies²⁰. Sociological research on transsexuals²¹ studies on how the body is used in doing and attributing gender (Bolin 1988; Ekins 1997; Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978) or managing stigma and passing (Feinbloom 1976; Kando 1973) or how the physical body is surgically altered (Billings and Urban 1982; Hausman 1995; Raymond 1979) tell us about the relation of gender and sex and gender related social obstacles.

Research on sexuality touched India, principally as a by-product of HIV-AIDS activism (Dowsett 2003). Gender, more than any other variable-or a structural principle (Dowsett 2003)-dominates the pandemic of HIV/AIDS (Connell 2002) which needs deeper structural analyses of gender (Liguori and Lamas 2003)

4 Mead (1928) in her work on Samoan sexuality also discusses homosexual relationships.

5 Devereux in 1937 reflected long-standing anthropological fascination with the Native American "berdache,"

6 Hill in 1940 produced studies of intermediate gender roles among the Mojave and Navaho, respectively,

7 Landes in 1947 investigated the presence of "passive homosexuals" as both leaders and initiates in Afro-Brazilian possession religions.

8 Van Baal (1966) had extended description on submerged orgiastic same-sex practices in a vivid description of their religious cosmogony among the Papuan Marind-Anim.

9 In the survey of different sexual behaviours in the cultures of the world found homosexuality as rare or repressed in only 28 out of the 76 sampled societies and in 17 societies, female homosexuality was known and accepted..

10 It was unknown, rare or repressed in only 28 out of the 76 sampled societies. In 17 societies, female homosexuality was known and accepted. During this same period sociologists Gagnon and Simon (1973) carried out revolutionary studies that explored how North American homosexuals functioned in everyday life in their communities.

11 Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, articles based on ethnographic research were increasingly published in academic journals, covering subjects such as "female berdache" (Schaeffer 1965),

12 E.g. Herdt 1981, 1987, 1997; Herdt and Lindenbaum 1992; Parker et al. 1991; Turner et al. 1989; Whitam 1986; and Wieringa 1989; Callender and Kochems 1983; Williams 1986; Roscoe, 1991, 1998.

13 Of the 'Native' North-America: Callender and Kochems 1983; Williams 1986; Roscoe 1991, 1998; Humphreys 1970; Goode and Troiden 1974; Delph 1978.

14 Of Oman (Wikan1977)

15 Of Kenya (Oboler1980)

16 In New Guinea (Wirz 1922; Williams 1939; van Baal 1966; Herdt 1994a)

17 Of Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Africa, and the Arabic world: Leupp 1995, for Japan; Evans-Pritchard 1970, for the Azande in the Sudan; Baldauf 1988 for Afghanistan; Rahman, 1989 for Pakistan

18 Like Brazilian tranvestis, or 1960s drag queens in the U.S., contemporary Japanese sex workers and their clients, or even gay and lesbian kinship in the U.S.

19 Recent academic interest in the Hijra really emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s with an argument between Carstairs (1956, 1957) and Opler (1960, 1961). Many scholars have written articles on them, most notably Nanda, (1990), Cohen (1995), Lal (2003), and Hall (1997; with O'Donovan 2006), the last of whom has written excellent reviews of the Hijra though their use of language.

20 E.g. Moodie (1994), Harries (1994), Gevisser and Cameron (1994), Murray and Roscoe (1998), Kendall (1999), Lockhart (2002), Njinje and Alberton (2002), Epprecht (2004), GALZ (2002), and Morgan and Wieringa (2005)

21 Transsexuals are the person whose gender identity is different from his/her biological sex and undergo chemical and/ or surgical alteration aligned with their assumed gender identity.

within and across the boundaries of cultures.²² The scholars (like Nanda 1990; Morris 1994; Cohen 1995, 2005; Reddy 2000, 2004, 2005, 2007; Hall 2005; Khan 2000, 2001, 2005; Purkayastha 1999; and Jenkins 2004) emphasize on the past and the present of the local categories of 'other' genders and sexuality in India. The scholars differ and overlap in their frameworks in accepting any unanimous position. Nanda's works (1985, 1990, 1999) on the diversity of gender and sexuality, with emphasis on Hijras²³ have other parallel works (like, Lynton and Rajan 1974; Vyas and Yogesh 1987; Sharma 1989; Lal 1997; Jaffrey 1996; Reddy 2005). According to Rosalind Morris, Hijra becomes "a drag queen" who [is] a hero [ine] in a global sexual resistance (Morris 1994: 16). As with any other community in India they are crosscut by a range of other axes that shape their identities (Reddy 2005, 2007). Cohen (1995) studies Hijras and commented on castration as castration of desire. He stated about Jankhas and Zenanas (similar to Kothis) as "men who sometimes dress like women and dance like Hijras but do not select castration" (Cohen 1995: 276).

The ethnographic evidence of other researchers like Naqvi and Mujtaba (1997:265) confirm the comparison of Hijras and Zenanas in Pakistan similarly, in which Hijra version of the Zenanas include "We are certainly not the same. Zenanas are in just for the dhanda (business)". The works like Vanita (2002), Vanita and Kidwai (2000) have also explored non-heterosexual sexuality in India. These studies concentrate on the strong presence of homosexual fiction in ancient, medieval and modern Indian fiction but they do not look closely at the present situation of non-heterosexual sexualities in India, like, Hijras, Kothis, Bisexuals and Gays. Jenkins (2004) locates Kothis inside the culture, as lesser men the most stigmatized [in the patriarchal, heterosexist and homophobic framework]. They experience considerable violence and harassment and, unless protected by higher incomes and social status, often are unable to finish school or gain an occupation (Bondyopadhyay and Khan 2002, 2004). Non-Kothi men having MSM engagements with the Kothis reflect the denial of male-to-male sex and homophobia in stating that they just fool around when they have sex with Kothis, just discharging, not really having sex, like a 'Real man'. Still considered males, but feeling gratified in the receptive role, these men are called Kothis, a term now widely used in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan and possibly related to the Thai term Katoey (Jenkins 2004). On the other hand, Reddy's ethnographic fieldwork in Hyderabad found that in Hyderabad Hijras fall under the umbrella term Kothis referring to a multitude of identities within the spectrum of male sexuality. Reddy examines the configuration of the related male identities around the axis of the act of penetration during sexual intercourse, along with doing [gendered] work. Reddy (2004) finds two models of sexuality and gender in male same-sex behaviours: a "Gay" model²⁴ and a "Kothi" model²⁵. NACO has accepted the generic position of the Kothis, at least for the transformation to the Hijras. Compared to the academic positions, the activist NAZ Foundation International, one of the largest non-profit organizations in South Asia working in the HIV/AIDS sector considers Kothi a sexual minority, a community historically rooted in Indian cultural traditions, as well as a self identifying label, more a sexual signifier than a gender in a Kothi-Panthi dynamics. Their comprehension of "Kothi framework" (Khan 2000) is realistically complex, nuanced and politically empowering. Khan (2005) also emphasises the critical and urgent issues of behaviour versus identity debate of Kothi-Panthi binarity within broader context of MSM (Male Sex with Male) behaviour. The emphases also include problems of proper counts of MSM behaviours and identities, risk, stigma and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS in the diverse social scenario of India. Now let the discussion of the data collected from the field illuminate the local scene of the Kothis. Recently Dey et al. (2010) focus on the emergence of the construct of the new categories in West Bengal, similar to Reddy's (2005) observation, within the network. The (sub) categories (like Arial Kothi, Koripese Kothi, Dupli Kothi, Dupli Gupti, Hijra, Parikh/Panthi/Giriya/Real-man/Heterosexual and Homosexual, Gay and Bisexual) are situational usage, but indicates the expansion and intensification of the lived experiences. Perhaps, according to Dey et al. (2010), they also indicate how the cultural responses to identity and 'otherness' culminate in forming and relating the local knowledge of gender, sexuality to the wider web of culture and society.

22 Since the formation of IASSCS on 1997 with the successful conference, 'Beyond Boundaries: Sexuality across Cultures', equally successful conferences Manchester (1999), Melbourne (2001), Johannesburg (2003) and San Francisco (2005) followed with growing reception: These differences between sexuality and gender and among their culture-specific articulations of these two are profound for not only how we understand the various HIV epidemics but also gender, sexuality and different dimensions of culture themselves at different social contexts.

23 All who proclaim they are "neither man nor woman"

24 A result of knowledge of global categories having inroads to the urban elites and higher.

25 Encompassing Hijras and Kothi, the later being the umbrella term for both Hijras, and Kothis as well as other identities like, Panthis.

Now this study presents an example of the struggle of a male homosexual who expose gender deviation. His efforts to survive within a negative cultural context point the finger at the hegemonic hetero - negativity in our society. His experiences suggest the conceptual similarities with the lives of other gender variant homosexuals across the culture.

III. Context To Encounter Babul

I first met Babul in an auto rickshaw. It was a nice morning and I was traveling from Phulbagan to Kadapara Manas Bangla²⁶ drop in center (DIC) in the auto rickshaw. At that time I was just familiar with terms like MSM (Male to Male Sex) and had very little know- how about 'meyeli purush' (effeminates). Babul was sitting on the front seat of the auto rickshaw and I was sitting just behind him. I was keenly watching him through the looking glass of the auto because during that moment he appeared to be something different to me. A young man with threaded eyebrows, eyes contoured with light kohl pencils, lips painted with lip gloss couldn't hide the cleanly shaven cheeks underneath the heavy dose of foundation and makeup. He was wearing a pair of ladies' jeans with an ordinary faded yellow T-shirt. One could make out his poor financial status from his very attire. He had shoulder length curly hair. He was very much aware that I was watching him. Whenever our eyes met he was turning his face away from me and looking outside. It was apparent that he was feeling embarrassed at the slightest instance of eye contact. We alighted from the auto at our respective destinations oblivious of the fact that our destination was same. Upon reaching the office of Manas Bangla I could make out that Babul is also an employer of that office. I got introduced with quite a number of people there. All of them asked me quite a few questions like why I am doing a research on them, being a women whether I was feeling uncomfortable talking to meyli purush (effeminates), whether I was finding it difficult to accept their existence, how were they going to be benefitted from revealing information about themselves.

The Kadapara DIC office had two rooms, a narrow kitchen area and a small toilet beside that kitchen. They used to chit-chat sitting in the room facing the main entrance. They also used to official work from there. In the adjacent room a doctor used to run his chamber. An iron staircase was there at the corner of the room. It was used to climb up the mezzanine floor. From time to time they stay there at night especially when they have some conflict with their parents. I wanted to talk to each one of them individually. That's why I sat in the doctor's chamber which was closed that day. I began to talk to Babul first. In the parlance of research methodology this is called interview. At that time Babul was just a 17-year old minor boy.

IV. Ethnographic Interrogation

As an ethnographer my aim was to explore the social and cultural aspects of the personal experiences of Babul that may expose the vulnerable self moved by and also resist cultural construction. I asked Babul that I want to know your story – how was your childhood, how is life now, what are your likes, dislikes, your love and so on. In sum, tell me about your life. Babul started his narration,

'As you can understand that I have a mind of a woman with a body of a man. That's why my story will be different from the story of other men. I belong to a lower middle class family. My Baba (father) doesn't earn much. I have an elder sister and a younger sister. Being the only son in the family everyone has high expectations from me. But since childhood I was like this as you are seeing me now. I used to like dressing up like women, wear saree, do my hair - these were my fascinations. I remember when I used to play with dummy utensils I always used to play the role of a woman. I used to cover my head with a cotton towel, twist the loose end like a braid and hang it over the shoulder. Then I used to wear saree, take a handbag on my shoulder and play around. My elder sister also used to play with me. I was around 5-6 years old at that time. When I grew up boys of my neighborhood invited me to play football but I never went because I never felt like playing those games. I loved playing with my elder sister and younger sister inside the house. Once or twice I went to the playground to play but couldn't match their competent. I used to fall. That's why I didn't go. Maa (mother) used to tell me, 'Go and play'. I used to reply that I cannot be that much boisterous, I fall down. I used to kelp mother in her household chores. It seemed to me like a game. For example, sometimes I used to clean up the utensils, wipe the floor, hang the wet clothes on strings for sun drying or taking them out of the sun when dry, used to make bori (little balls of pasted pulse), then I used to make designs on the floor for Laxmi puja (worship goddess). Maa never asked me to do these but I loved doing these. I still do these chores from time to time, I cook and I can make perfectly round chapptis'.

26 Manas Bangla is a community based organisation of MSMs, through this organization, TI Projects for West Bengal Male-to-Male Sexual Health Promotion and HIV Control Program supported by WBSAPCS (under NACO) works.

The story began with a description of his frustration with the difficulties in the continuing conflict between mind and the material body. In addition, unable to match the competencies with other boys at playground also seemed to stir up Babul's insecurities about his expected masculinity and confirmed his anxieties that he would be rejected within a masculine conscious society. He had tried to engage him in feminine works what he wants to do.

I have asked Babul, when did you start to recognise yourself as a woman more significantly?

'When I developed liking for a boy. That time I was only eight years old. I do not know whether it was my first love or not but I started developing a liking for a boy in my school. He was 4 years senior to me. I used to sit and watch his play during the tiffin time. I used to try to strike a conversation with him. If I could not see him I used to go to his class at the tiffin time. After that I used to feel like going to school well-dressed. [Babul smiled]. I used to puff powder on my face, put cream on my lips before going to school. After taking bath I used to enter my room and close the door so that no one can see what I was doing. If my elder sister or someone else was there in the room I used to ask her to leave with the excuse that I wanted to get dressed. I could understand that I am not a man like other and I am somewhat different. Mother used to yell me, 'You are a boy, why do you need to close the door for getting dressed?' I never used to reply. You know, I cannot come out of the bathroom after shower bare chested. I cannot even take off clothes in front of mother. After this age the feminine self of mine started getting pronounced'.

His further narratives portrayed his prominent coming out womanly at childhood age. He had discovered his orientation after getting attracted to a boy at school. Proceeding from those narratives I have enquired, did you have friends in school? Have you ever faced any kind of harassment in the school for your expression?

'Very few, our school was a co-ed one. I could not gel with the boys of my class. They also didn't like to sit beside me because of my effeminate behaviour. They used to call me names like 'boudi' (sister in law), 'sundori'(beautiful) since class seven. I used to feel comfortable talking to girls but girls didn't accept me in their group. I used to be very lonely. That's why I used to sit alone on the playground during tiffin time. I used to make myself isolated to shutter my differentness. Rabi was a good friend of mine. Rabi used to stay in my neighborhood. I met him one day in a grocery shop. He was like me. We became friends. It still persists'.

'What makes you think I didn't face harassment? I had to leave my study due to that. When I was in seven standards, senior students used to hug me, kiss me. I used to feel terribly embarrassed. Some of them used to caress my breasts. There was one boy called Saikat, he used to bully me a lot. He used to hug me from behind and say, 'Let me see whether you have boobs'. I used to get angry. The teachers also used to make fun of me due to my effeminate nature .If I made any mistakes or was unable to recollect any lesson they would laugh. The History teacher mimicking the voice of a woman would say, 'Can't you give the answer?' As things continued this way, one day I decided that I will not go to school. I didn't like that. I left study in the middle of eight standards'.

His account described also a history of shocking events, getting harassment at school because of his different gender expression. Although he had an idea that he was somewhat different (in gender) from other boys of his age since the age of eight; he had tried not come out to anyone and prepared himself isolated but his attitude posture made him vulnerable to another. He had to suffer unnecessary taunt and ridicule which led him to disillusionment and a greater sense of loneliness and hopelessness. His education being stopped as he had failed to confront external societal pressures of stigmatisation and suppression, as well as his own internalised shame for his gender otherness.

What kind of behaviour you have received or receive from your neighborhood, relatives and also from family?

'I started getting bad-names in the neighborhood after I left school. Though they knew about my effeminate nature, they used to taunt my mother for that. But my reputation was tarnished when I fell in love with a boy in the locality. I couldn't share my feelings with any one of my family or friends. It seems to me very suffocated. Then I was so desperate that I went straight to him and said that I loved him. That guy was such that he spread the news in the neighborhood. The entire household surrounding my house came to know about it and they began ridiculing. Our next door neighbor, whom I used to call Aunty, came to my mother and asked, 'Why is your son like a girl? Counsel him. What is this? He is proposing a boy?' That day, after I came home mother said, 'I will murder you and then kill myself. I have to listen to so much criticism because of you. You seem to have no remorse. Previously people never came to our house to criticize you, now they are coming to insult us'. That day, after my father came back home and learnt about the incident he threatened to estrange me of the home. Then he started biting me with an umbrella that was lying in front of him. He said,

'Go and earn money, only then you will have food'. He said to my mother, 'You have given birth to a Hijra (eunuch)? I would have been at peace if I would have killed him strangulating just after his birth'. They didn't give me food that night. I cried inconsolably throughout the night. I hid my face behind a pillow while crying so that my sister didn't become aware. From that day the boys in my neighborhood started calling me names like, ruposhi, khukumoni (girlish name) etc. The person whom I loved also ridiculed me. He used to say tauntingly, 'See that eunuch is going'. It has so happened that I have cried sitting in the darkness of the field. I have asked God why has created me this way. I used to pray to God to cure me, make me like other boys. But that crisis had taught me great lessons in my life. I began to realize that in this world I have none like me, I am alone, I don't have right to love. Neighbors also used to taunt my sister saying that her brother is a eunuch. Though she used to protest at that time but used to thrash me with words after returning home. One night she told me that she felt ashamed to recognize me as an elder brother. I was so hurt that day that I thought of killing myself. The next day I planned to send mother to someplace and hang myself. But I couldn't do that ultimately. The situation has remained same in the locality till date. I don't care anymore. Sometimes I retort back saying that let someone like me be borne in your family only then you will realize. My maternal uncle, aunty don't leave any opportunity to insult my mother. That's why I don't attend invitations for last four years. I feel that my parents get insulted due to me. I cannot tolerate the gossiping of my relatives'.

He felt agonised by the words used by his heterosexual surroundings of him as it breaks his sense of gender and sexual identity at that young age. He realised that this was due to shut him as the agenda of our society is to stop his personal development as an effeminate man. He had understood that his coming out are not accepted in the society and somehow it also affect his own acceptance of self. Continuous disappointment and internalized homophobia tortured his personality a lot. He had wanted to change himself and his gesture. He had unsuccessful to receive support and guidance from his family; rather their aggressiveness and pain raised his depression and anxieties about his sexuality. When he had failed to handle such difficulties had tried to commit suicide.

How did you come in contact with Manas Bangla? Did you feel comfortable with its members?

'When these incidents were happening in my life at that time I came to know Shyamol, Bappai, Kuntal. I was walking along the road, suddenly they called me from behind, 'Hey, listen'. Then they told me that 'We are also like you. We have an organisation where effeminate boys like us gather, they chat, share their thoughts and views among themselves. Would you like to join us? You would feel better'. I was very scared seeing them. I noticed that they have threaded eyebrows, one of them was wearing a ladies top, and they were moving their hands in a ladylike manner while talking. I responded saying that I will let them know later. They asked my name. I told them a fake name. Then I left. After two days I again met them in exactly the same place. They didn't ask me to go with them that day. Rather they started chatting with me and continued for one to two hours. I listened to their conversations, took part in it and found that in reality they are like me, their views and thoughts, likes and dislikes are much like mine. I liked them. The next day I visited their organisation in Kada Para. Then I started feeling that there are people in this world who are like me. I started visiting that place regularly. I feel much comfortable with them. They make my days with peace and pleasure. I brought Rabi, a neighborhood friend, along. After coming into place I came to know that I am a 'Kothi'. I took a new name, Nitu. My friends bestowed this name on me as they were of the opinion that my eyes had a semblance to actor Nitu Singh's eyes'.

Potential supportive networks make it possible for him to talk openly about his orientation and manage support. The available optimistic atmosphere helps him to come out spontaneously which is essential to maintain well being. Though at foremost, internalized phobia prevents him to confess his orientation to the supporters. He has brought up within a heterosexual environment and sense of negative attitude towards different sexuality has been embodied. His narration also depicts that the identity of a Kothi appears to be performatively acquired.

Continuing his words, I had asked, was there any kind of change in you after you became aware of your 'Kothi' identity? Babul was quiet for some time. Then he asked, 'what kind of change are you talking about?' Anything that you didn't know or practice before joining this organisation I said. Babul smiled. Then feigning innocent he replied,

'I have learnt to have sex [with a naughty smile]. These people are the Guru (boss) of the art of seducing men. I have had sex many times in the area near Kada Para Lake. After the sunset I used to go there with them and used to have sex for money. If I used to like a man then I used to have sex with him free of cost. I haven't done sex this way before. I learnt from them the tricks of flirting men and seducing them to have sex. There are people who seduce us also. And I learnt to give 'tali' (to clap in a particular manner, used by Hijra/

eunuch). Through this clap one Kothi can identify another Kothi and in case of any untoward incident this clap can be used to frighten people by claiming that I am a Hijra. Another thing I learnt is to dress up neatly. In my house I never wore ladies jeans, top or salwar. Influenced by these people I bought all these after coming here. I was very happy on the day when I first threaded my eyebrows.

What are the reparations you saw in your house?

In my house the situation turned so tense that my mother was about to evict me from the house. Now she doesn't say anything. She has got used to seeing me this way. I don't cross dress inside the house, they don't even know about my cross dressing. Maa gets angry, she often says, 'As you are growing up all your mannerisms and style of walking is changing. You are a boy, what are you doing?' Once I told mother to think of me as her other daughter instead of thinking me as her son. On that day Maa hugged me and cried profusely. I was heartbroken due to the agony of my mother. I feel extremely guilty when Maa cries because of me. I feel that it is I for whom Maa and Baba are suffering'.

His narrations highlight that after propinquity within transgenders and homosexual networking, he became skilled at three things, number one, he had gained knowledge about sexuality and sexual practices and acquired the tricks how to manage the punters for doing sex. Number two, he had obtained the art to make himself more feminine and beautiful to other, and last but not least, he had acquired the course of actions to defend himself and to fight up against homo-opponents. But his changed attitude was not so easily accepted by his family, rather his mother's gasping agony had broken his heart and produce guilt against what he was doing for his satisfaction.

I had enquired how was your experience of having sex for the first time? Did you feel good or you were afraid or you felt bad?

'I was terrified at the first time. A guy was standing beside the bushes by the Lake. He pulled my hand. Said, 'Want to have sex? I will pay you Rs. 100/'. My friends pushed me towards him. I said, 'I need 50 bucks more.' He agreed. My heart was trembling. Didn't know what he is going to do with me. Though, by that time I have heard stories of such incidents. He asked me to do oral sex. I was feeling nauseated initially then I started liking it. He then asked me to do anal sex. Under that bush in the darkness he made me undress and allow me to lie down. Then he rose above me and started pushing his penis inside my anus. It was very painful. I shouted and got up. He again approached me. I said, pay me whatever you want to and leave. He got angry, gave me Rs. 100/- and left. After returning to my friends I narrated the incident and they burst into laughter [He smiled]. Then they advised me to make the anus flexible using carrot and spit. Now I don't face any problem'.

Do you use condom? Do you know about HIV?

'Yes, I know about HIV. I heard about it after joining this organisation. Previously I didn't use condom, now I do. But not always. There are many customers who initially agree to use condoms but later on they refuse. They threaten not to pay if I use a condom. They forcefully want to have sex without condom. And there are some people who only come to me. They say, 'we don't go to other people, we only come to you'. Then what is the need for condoms? That's why sometimes I have dropped use of condom'.

He had experienced an ambivalent first sexual incident. But somehow he had enjoyed that incident. His narrations provide the picture of sexual practice and preferences of a transgender. He has possessed the awareness of HIV/AIDS, but in reality he was not so conscious to practice safer sex regularly. This makes him vulnerable devoid of his consideration.

I had asked Babul, how do you choose your customers?

'If a 'Straight' is attracted to me I can easily recognize by the smile, or sometimes the way he looks at me. But I don't entertain sweepers, cleaners or cargo carriers, they are very unclean types and also the aged men. I like to do sex within the age group of 25-30 years, they should be tall and have a well-built figure with no hair on the chest'

Didn't you ever like a woman?

'What a shame! How can be a relationship between two sisters? [He laughed] I have no attraction towards women. I am a woman. Only God has given me a body of a man. I also dream of having a husband. I want to have a family with in-laws. I will cook for my husband before he leaves for office.'

This narration cleared the clash between his thought and his existence. He had possessed the fantasy of his womanised world, where he webbed his own family with husband and in-laws.

Do you have a steady boyfriend right now? Or do you love somebody?

'No I don't have someone like that. I don't want to get hurt loving someone. No-one will stay. They will have fun and then leave. They will not value my love. Ultimately he will love a woman, marry her. My life will be shattered in between. It is only good to dream about a lover. Moreover, how can he spend the rest of his life with me? I cannot carry forward his bloodline. Ultimately I have the psyche of a man. Why should I ruin somebody's life then?'

Continuous rejection from the loved one makes him so harder and this had pushed him to direct his desires and emotions. The crude reality makes his movement very rigid.

Have you ever faced public harassment?

'Quite frequently, inside the bus, train, on the road, everywhere. Whatever respect cats and dogs command we don't even have that much. People hurl abuse words whenever they wish. Not only me, have all like us had to face this kind of public harassment. A few days back we were returning from the Phulbagan crossing. Suddenly a guy started uttering profanities towards us. The moment Babin protested that guy slapped him on his cheek. As we turned aggressive towards him, a few friends of that guy gathered. They bit each of us. They punched us wherever they wished. Can we match with the physical strength of men? Then they ran away. Besides, there is taunting, ridiculing by people even sexual assault also. But you know it is because of our mistake we are being abused.'

His narration cleared the situation of harassment because of the significant reinforcement of the role of stereotyped 'masculine' sexuality with which Kothis are socialised as sexual beings. His narration also revealed that due to possession of feminine nature, he has already withdrawn himself from the aggressive attitudes which may seem 'masculine'.

My conversation with Babul came to an end for that day. By the end of 2012, I came to know from a friend of Babul that he had gone to Baliya district in Uttar Pradesh, India to perform dance as a 'Launda dancer'²⁷. There, someone had burnt his hand with a burning butt of a cigarette. He escaped. He was seriously ill. I went to Kadambari office²⁸. In between we met each other several times at transgender rally, LGBT film festivals, conferences etc. But not as an interviewer and interviewee, rather as a friend. However, Babul was in that office. Seeing me he said, 'Look Didi (sister) what they have done to my hand'. I saw the wound has been healed.

I asked what happen Babul?

'One of my friends introduced me to a band master in the Sealdah. He immediately gave me Rs. 4000/- and booked me as a dancer per night program basis. Seeing the amount of money I agreed. On the very first event when I went to dance I understood in the severity of the situation. There I was raped in the hands of 8-10 guys. On the night of 'Lagon' (program) after I completed performing the last dance a boy from the band party came and told me. "4-5 guys are looking for you. You better escape. Come tomorrow morning. They are not good guys. They are carrying guns". I was frightened. Where do I escape? I entered the Van meant for our travel and lie down quietly in its back seat. Those guys dragged me by my hair and brought me out of the car. As I was shouting, they tied my mouth with a piece of cloth. Then they carried me to a warehouse in the backyard of a mustard field. No one was around that place. They tied my hand to a rod with a rope. They undressed me and 10-12 boys raped me. I was bleeding so profusely that I lost sense. I gained consciousness in the hospital. Band master informed me that the guys left me by the side of the field and escaped. Next day

27 In some places in India, such as in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (such as Azamgarh, Ballia, Deoria, Gazipur, Gorkhpur, Kushinagar, Maharajunge, Mau, Varansai etc of Uttar Pradesh and Bhojpur, Buxar, Chapra, Gopalganj, Muzaffarpur, Patna, Samastipur, Siwan, Vaishali etc of Bihar), there is a tradition of 'Launda dance' where the young men with feminine make-up dance in wedding and other ceremonies for money. Feminine men from other districts of these two states are used to go there to take part in Launda dance. This chance of acceptance of feminine men in the above areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar unlike West Bengal attract Kothis of other provinces including adjacent West Bengal and even distant province of Maharashtra to dance well and to be recognized as Laundas. (Dey, Das, Chaudhury and Shaw 2012)

28 That DIC of Manas Bangla has been turned into the office of Plus and Manas Bangla DIC has been shifted to Triangular Park.

the members of the band party found me and admitted me to the hospital. I had seven stitches. I didn't receive the due sum of money from the master. He said that he had spent that money for my treatment. I left his band and stayed in a friend's quarter for a month, I had spent all rest of my earned money. Then I have joined another band. The band master made me write a three months contract on the court stamp paper. Gave me Rs. 5000/-. I thought he was a good man. After reaching there I understood that 'he is a son of a bitch'. Please don't mind for using profanities. He took me to his place. Nothing happened for the first two weeks. Then his son began to kick the door of my bedroom at night. Opening the door I saw him in a severely drunken condition. He forcefully had sex with me. I couldn't say anything since he was the son of the band master. This started happening after every 2-3 days. I didn't like this. I didn't open the door one night. He kicked the door, broke the latch and entered the room. He hit me terrifically that day. Then he had sex with me vigorously. In a state of intoxication he was doing it so hard that I was feeling tremendous pain. I was furious and the next day I went to the master and gave him a piece of my mind. That evening his son entered my room, made me lie on the floor and started biting me with a rod. In great pain I couldn't stand. Then he lighted a cigarette and kept on pressing the burning edge on my left hand. Along with that he was vengefully uttering abusive words. Thereafter he left. I started crying inconsolably. Then at four in the morning I ran away from that place and got a bus.'

I asked, why did you go there to perform launda dance?

'What do I do? Tell me? Manas Bangla doesn't pay salary months after months, they don't get funding. I have borrowed from so many people. I don't like to do sex work. I've little education. Who will provide me job? Even once Baba managed to get me a job in an office at BBD Bag Kolkata in 2008. It was a job of a peon. Salary was Rs. 2000/-. But how long can I hide myself? My effeminate nature got exposed. A high ranked official of that office used to give signals to me. I didn't say anything. Thereafter, on one Saturday he asked to stay back. He said, 'Just wait for a while. I will take some time to finish my work'. Then after everybody has left he took me to the office toilet and had sex with me. Initially I felt awkward but later on I started enjoying the pleasure. After this incidence he kept on insisting on having sex with me. When I refused that scoundrel spread the word that I am a homosexual. Everybody started laughing at me, they taunted me. I stopped going to office out of shame. Then tell me from where do I earn money? There is poverty in the family. The condition has worsened after the marriage of my elder sister. After taking care of my own expenses I have to contribute in my family. From where do I get so much money? That's why I went to dance.

His experience depicts deception, shock and stress in a completely powerless state as a Launda that affect his health and human rights both. Poor economic condition and low opportunity for a job due to his gender variant attitude pushed him to take that risk.

How you feel in those days?

'At that time I used to think about Maa and my family. I used to feel like crying and think why God made me the way I am. What wrong did I do? I used to think that since I have made them suffer so much, God is playing this game with me. I decided to change myself. I would be the way my mother wants me to be. After return back I thought to change my gesture and buried my desires. I had cropped my hair. Dressed like a man I went to visit Maa. I observed that Baba was not happy but Maa was very happy. Maa asked me where I have been so long. I said, 'I went to Mumbai for a job. But I left the job'. I had around Rs. 12000/- with me, I gave it to Maa. I didn't visit Kadapara friends at that time. But I can't resist myself for long. Within a couple of weeks I have again changed my mind, met my friends and I had prepared myself to live my life as my choice'.

His experience tells that the hegemonic hetero-normativity push one to do exactly what it expected from you. Particularly within a wider negative societal climate it is tough to retrospect gender alternative behaviour. That's why he had ever tried to change himself and act as an ideal man what society expected from a born male. But his unconscious gender expression and sexual preference dominate his counterfeit and make him prepared to struggle for his existence.

V. Conclusion

This paper tries to negotiate the feelings of Babul towards his memories and experiences. His story is very much common to other transgender / Kothis of Kolkata, India. His experiences are nonetheless very rich and valued resources for understanding the 'other' sexual and / or gender identity as mutually acquiring and shifting between effeminate and non effeminate Indian males. The vulnerability of the effeminates (emotional, social and physical) in Indian culture is embedded in the very processes of performing gender and sexual identity in and against the 'local' heterosexist, homophobic and hetero-normative local society. The vulnerability is more due to the gendered manifestation which is more public, than sexuality which is more

private. The above discussion may indicate that at 'private' levels homophobia and male same-sex desire of Indian hetero-normative masculinity are denied by homo-tolerance and manipulative sexuality. On the other hand coming out was essential for well-being. Even revealing and sharing non-heterosexual experiences and identities to family remains a significant and difficult process for individuals who fear rejection and invisibility.

On the other hand, Indian transgender or Kothis do not live in any conventional framework of community, hence unprotected by any traditionally accepted social back-ups, though somewhat relieved by the support of the CBOs. The sexual and / or gender identity of behaviour, at least in context of transgender/ Kothis, appears to be performatively acquired, alterable and imparted from inside the 'effeminate' Kothis themselves and from outside by the non-effeminate related 'others', i.e. the heterosexist society in and around. The horizon of the experiences of the transgender/ Kothis, though more or less silenced by the dominant order of culture, is rapidly increasing account of change, especially in the regime of tension between 'global' and 'local'. The limitation of the study is the research conducted within a given cultural and social context. On this basis, the findings of this study are limited and cannot be generalised to the rest of the population of transgender of India.

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