

Indian Youth Perceptions and attitudes towards Homosexuality - A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Homosexuality has existed for generations in the human society yet normative culture legitimizes only heterogeneous sexuality while homosexuality or bisexuality are deemed as an aberration. With the Indian society being predominantly homophobic and political persuasion being highly contingent upon 'public sentiment', understanding attitudes and sentiments of the people, particularly the youth, toward homosexuality becomes an important aspect in analyzing resistance or acceptance of homosexuals in our society. The overarching objective of this micro-level study is to explore the Indian youth perceptions and attitudes toward homosexuality. This research into the broad theme of homosexuality was attempted as a qualitative study to be able to do a fine grained thematic analysis as a way of developing deeper appreciation of the content.

Keywords: homosexuality, youth, Indian society

1.1 Introduction: Adolescence is that period of time of emerging sexuality where one's feelings, identities and behaviors become more pronounced. Homosexuality is a behavior or a phenomenon in which persons of the same sex are attracted or have sexual relations with each other. Such a behavior has existed for generations in the human society yet normative culture legitimizes only certain a sexuality (heterogeneous) while others such as homosexuality or bisexuality are deemed as an aberration. We perceive ourselves to be living in an era of heightened self-awareness and individualism, and yet when a certain section of society with non-heterosexual feelings, identities, or behaviors choose to conform to their sexual orientation we create an unwelcoming environment for them. American Psychological Association reports that "verbal harassment and abuse are nearly universal experiences among lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and that discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in employment and housing appears to remain widespread" ¹. Such discrimination and unequal treatment calls into question the notion of natural rights or more appropriately, human rights. Homosexual intercourse in India was treated as an offence, punishable by law, under the Indian Penal Code 1860 until 2009 when this law was struck down by the Delhi High Court. The Delhi High Court judges commented that the 148 year old ban that denied gay rights was an "affront to human dignity" and that "it cannot be forgotten that discrimination is antithesis of equality and that it is the recognition of equality which will foster dignity of every individual." ² Although the lift

on the ban saw a celebration among activists and campaigners, it was resisted by religious groups, including Muslims clerics and Catholic clergyman. That the Indian society is predominantly homophobic was confirmed when CNN-IBN television news channel conducted countrywide survey revealed that as many as 73 per cent of Indians believe homosexuality should be illegal³. Political persuasion is highly contingent upon 'public sentiment', so understanding attitudes and sentiments of the people toward homosexuality is an important aspect in analyzing resistance or acceptance of homosexuals in our society.

1.2 Literature Review: Measuring attitudes requires both qualitative and quantitative research methodology. The literature that was reviewed for the purpose of this study was a mix of quantitative and qualitative data analysis. One of the papers studied was a research conducted in two New Zealand cities in 1978, in which 321 heterosexual adults were interviewed to assess public attitudes toward homosexuality. Interviews were held mainly to understand the extent of the prejudice or anti-homosexual attitudes in society. This is an important theme that is reiterated by many social scientists as Hacker (1971: 83) states quite explicitly that "homosexuals feel that the root of their problem lies in social attitudes toward them" (as quoted in Bowman 1979:229). Bowman in his research for probing for attitudes used both closed and open ended questions in his interviews and a series of items in a Likert type scale⁴. His findings suggested that the attitudes expressed were indicative of tolerance, if not acceptance of homosexuals and homosexuality. He also attributed this high level of tolerance and acceptance to the well-organized gay liberation movement of the 1970's in New Zealand as well as the National Gay Rights Coalition and its member organization affiliations. His findings are as presented below.

Attitudes to Homosexuality and to Homosexual Rights:
(in percentages)

Moral attitudes (N=322)	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
"What consenting adults do together is their own business"	93.8	1.6	4.6
"A person's sexual orientation is their own business"	93.2	3.7	3.1
"People have a right to be homosexual if they choose to be"	86.0	5.3	8.7
"Homosexuals are just people like everyone else"	75.8	5.9	18.3
"Homosexuals have a sense of morals"	74.0	13.0	13.0
"Homosexuality is a natural sexual variation in humans"	51.3	23.9	24

Attitude to Rights/Human Rights	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
"Do you think that homosexuals should have the right to any kind of job they want, provided they are qualified of course?"	88.5	1.2	10.3
"Do you feel that the Human Rights Act (1977) should be widened to include protection for people on the basis of their sexual orientation?"	79.5	4.0	16.5
"Do you feel there is any need to change the law regarding homosexual acts in the Crimes Act?"	74.4	3.0	22.6

Source: Bowman (1979:233)

Another study was conducted on behalf of American Association for Public Opinion Research in 1997, in which over 2500 people were polled in different American states. The data was divided into 12 issue areas the most relevant to our study being 1) the acceptability or morality of homosexual behavior 2) the legality of homosexual behavior, 3) civil rights protections and civil liberties for lesbians and gays, 4) affective responses to homosexuality. Yang (1997) analyzed the poll data alongside previous studies and found that "it is clear that mass opinion change has occurred within the past 2 decades, often to a striking degree" (p. 477). He claimed that opinion changes were however issue specific and that "liberalization in one area of public policy may coexist with equally striking instances of opinion stability" (ibid, p.477).

Yet another study by Widmer et.al; International Social Survey Program conducted in 1998 compares attitudes toward premarital sex, teenage sex, extramarital sex and homosexual sex in twenty four countries. The study posits that different countries have distinctive sexual regimes with different moral standards depending upon the type of sexuality and challenges the simplistic notion that a permissive- non permissive dichotomy is sufficient to describe variations across countries. The study showed considerable variation from country to country and in most countries; 18 of the 24, a majority of people had reported homosexual sex as being 'always wrong'. In some of the countries such as in Spain, the Czech Republic, Canada and Norway a substantial percentage of people voiced a tolerant attitude toward homosexual sex though public opinion was seen to be polarized on this issue within those countries. The Netherlands was the only exception, where a majority of the people were seen to be tolerant of same sex relations. A limitation of this study was that these 24 countries "do not constitute a representative sample of countries or cultures" (ibid, p. 355) as all 24 nations that chose to participate were largely western and industrialized and there were only two Asian nations among these; Japan and Philippines. Although, there is varied literature and research available in attitudes toward homosexuality, but there doesn't seem to be much data available on

intergenerational attitudes. The studies mentioned above were conducted on a large scale, but breaking up of data based on age groups could have made for a different analysis altogether.

1.3 Research Question: This report is based on thematic analysis of data. The overarching objective of this research was to explore the Indian youth perceptions and attitudes toward homosexuality. The questions that were put forth in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Interviews conducted were,

1. Is homosexuality anti nature?
2. Do you perceive homosexuality as a western cultural influence or that which has existed through generations all over the world?
3. Should homosexuality be considered immoral?
4. Do you see homosexual orientation as related to human rights?

2.1 Research Design: A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted to bring out the discernment of sexual identities from among a group of social science students and to understand the ways in which social and cultural structures are perceived to as being related to sexual freedom. Three interviews were conducted of 18 year olds, boys and girls, from different parts of the country to understand the articulation of a subject; the complexities of which are manifold and often, not readily noticeable. Thematic analysis is used as a method of analyzing qualitative data. The subject of study did not require time to be considered as a study variable and therefore a cross sectional data was collected for the purpose of this research.

2.2 Research Site: The research was conducted in an interim campus of a social sciences college, located in the city of Hyderabad, in Andhra Pradesh. The interim campus of this college is located within the larger campus of Andhra Pradesh Academy of Rural Development (APARD). The interviews and FGD were conducted in a classroom, after class hours. The demography of the research site is mainly a generational cohort of the millennial generation. They are under graduate and post graduate students of Social Sciences, pursuing varied specialization. Most students live on campus, while there are a handful of them who live off campus. The students come from different parts of the country with diverse backgrounds.

2.3 Subject Population: The research sought under graduate students of social sciences in the age group of 17 to 20 years. The participants of the Focus Group Discussion, two males and two females are natives of different metropolitan cities of the country. They are undergraduate students and known to be active participants of college literary debates and events. The interview participants, though classmates of the FGD participants, come from relatively smaller cities and towns. The two female participants were informed to have come from small towns in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, with highly traditional backgrounds.

Similarly, the male participant is a native of a small village in Rajasthan.

2.4 Sampling Methodology: The purpose of the study called for a purposive or judgmental sample. Although the purpose was to know young people's views, particularly adolescents, a maximum variation in sampling was also attempted. The idea was to get varied perceptions of teenagers belonging to different cultural and social heritage. A more diverse group would facilitate to form a pattern of attitudes and behaviors and would also help to understand variations in perceptions and sensitivities among youths.

2.5 Data Collection: A focus group discussion was chosen as a means of data collection mainly because different themes emerge in the process which are insightful in analysis of perceptions and beliefs. The data gained thus is descriptive and detailed in nature. The other method of inquiry that was employed for this study was interviews. Interviews has the distinct advantage of allowing to establish rapport and clarify ambiguous answers. The reason for choosing participants with a specific background (here, conservative) for the interviews was because sexuality is still a mute subject for many sections of the Indian population. This was also to ensure that if the participant felt uncomfortable or shy at any given point, the interview could be discontinued, without further pursuance.

2.6 Field Report: Three participants, were chosen for the interview, on the recommendation of two mutual friends. Access to the participants was easy as they are college juniors of the researcher. Although Seidman (1991) says, that "the easier the access, the more complicated the interview." in this case, rapport building was more easily done, owing to a commonality which facilitated in a smooth interview and the interviewees were also found to be more vocal, than, was anticipated. The FGD participants, were acquaintances as well as college juniors of the researcher. Information regarding the purpose of research, the amount of time the participant will have to spare for the interview/ FGD, the issues of confidentiality, compensation, voluntary participation, refusal to participate, a brief idea about the nature of the interview was orally conveyed to the participants. As the objective was to understand the perceptions of the participants toward homosexuality and involved questions that required them an enquiry into their own moral or value systems, the topic was communicated one day in advance. Informed consent was obtained before the interview began and two out of the three interviewees requested for maintenance of confidentiality. No logistical problems were faced during the interviews or the FGD as it was well planned and permission was sought to use the classroom after class hours. Privacy was ensured as no one else was present while the interviews and FGD were conducted.

2.7 Data Saturation: The research sought to understand personal attitudes and opinions and the ways in which they intersect with those of others involved in the research. Although most questions were open

ended and discussions were drawn-out, they tended into close-ended conclusions. By that logic, the research reached data saturation and no new themes emerged that were immediately relevant to the purpose of the study.

2.8 Analytical Framework: Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and the data has been presented according to themes. It often became difficult to decide which quote went under which theme as what the participant was saying could be classified under more than one theme. Classifying the interview based on themes also reflects then the researchers own interpretation in making sense of the data. Personal nuances, characteristics and experiences gave emergence to sub themes that were not calculated prior to the interviews and FGD. Thematic analysis also helped to move the analysis from a broad reading of the data towards discovering patterns and developing themes. The broad theme of homosexuality required a fine grained analysis and thematic analysis was a way of developing deeper appreciation of the content.

2.9 Issues of Validity: Research validity is important as it determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are. Although some researchers have argued that validity is not applicable in qualitative research, but there has been a realization that it is still necessary to have somekind of qualifying check or measure for their research. Two measures of validity that were used for this study were, 'clarifying researcher's bias' and 'fairness'. The researcher comes from a cosmopolitan environment and is a student of social sciences, and was aware of being different from the participants. The researcher had her own firm opinions and beliefs about the subject of study but was alert not allow those from interfering either in the interview process or in the analysis process. 'Fairness' is ensured as the researcher has used several quotations in the report to validate interpretation and findings.

2.10 Ethical Procedure Followed: Informed oral consent was got from all participants. They were informed about the nature of the study as well as of the topic one day in advance. This was done to make the participants aware of their role in the research process and ensured the participant has the right to refuse to participate. Privacy concerns were addressed before and after the interview. Confidentiality issues were clarified and the informant were also assured that the data recorded would be protected. The participants were explained the risks of sharing personal experiences in a FGD, as the researcher can only request all the participants to keep what was said in the group as confidential but cannot personally stop participants from sharing what was discussed in the group. The participants were also informed that they would not be given any incentives for participating in the research. Interviews and FGDs were recorded on a recording device installed in the researcher's mobile phone. The recording was secured using a software security key.

Chapter III – ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

3.1 Mentioned below are demographic details of the sample used for this research.

	Interview	FGD
Number of participants	3	4
Gender of participants	Two females and one male	Two males and two females
Age of participants	17 to 20 years	17 to 20 years
Hometown of participants	Guntur, Alwar, Solapur	Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad

3.2 The themes that were explored in the Interviews and FGDs were as follows.

- Is homosexuality is anti-nature?
- Is there a western cultural influence on homosexuality?
- Is homosexuality is immoral?
- Is homosexuality is linked to human rights?

All interview participants believed that homosexuality was not against nature. Whereas, two participants from the FGD staunchly believed that homosexuality was anti-nature and one of whom stated “that sexual intercourse, by nature, is meant only for the purpose of procreation”. Invariably the discussion went into the causative factors of homosexuality. All FGD participants were aware that scientists have not determined the exact reasons why an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. One FGD participant remarked that homosexuality is “an abnormality, probably”. All interview participants unanimously voiced that people are genuinely attracted to same sex and to that extent they believed that homosexuality is natural. No participant considered it immoral to be homosexual but one FGD participant said that his “moral systems are not yet developed, basically they are not in place yet so, I shall refrain from commenting upon this question. But on second thoughts, I don't find anything wrong in one being homosexual”. One of the female interview participant stated that “homosexuality as a phenomenon is not a western cultural influence but because of the westerners, homosexualism is spreading”. On being asked to elaborate, she said that “more and more homosexuals are coming out of the closet and openly claiming their sexuality owing to the gay liberation movements happening abroad”. The researcher asked for clarification on whether the participant considered the western influence as being responsible for the increasing number of homosexuals in India, to which she then replied that “it may appear that western cultural influences has led to people becoming homosexual, but in reality it is a natural tendency or orientation to which any human being is susceptible.” Two FG participants argued that homosexuality is more prevalent in western

cultures so it is difficult to say whether it is natural or unnatural, because “if it is natural it should be universal.” All participants believed that homosexuality is a human rights issue and one FG participant put it as “all people are created equal and so should they be treated, irrespective of their sexual orientation.” The research shows that all of those interviewed are not anti-homosexuals and support the removal of negative sanctions against homosexuals.

The themes that emerged during the interviews and FGDs were as follows:

- If a small percentage of people try out homosexuality for fun, then can it be considered as an instinctive emotion or a natural feeling? This again moves into homosexuality and the nature versus nurture debate.
- The stereotypical characteristics of homosexuals being the reason for intolerance among most sections of the population.
- Are social science students (such youth) more tolerant and thoughtful of sensitive issues such as this as they are conditioned in a particular way and are taught to interrogate societal constructs?
- Supporting the cause of homosexuals is one thing but living with one or being friends with one might not feel as normal as being friends with a heterosexual person.

3.3 Strengths and Limitations:

Strengths of the Study

- The participants shared a certain level of comfort with the researcher which made possible vocalization of complex phenomenon in great detail. The emergence of newer themes is a validation of that.
- Knowing the participants afforded the researcher to seek clarification on several occasions and probing the participants (whenever required) to elaborate became easier.

Limitations of the Study

- Only three interviews and one FGD with four participants were conducted. So the data sample is not representative of all youth.
- Although the sampling method used was purposive sampling, due to the lack of time on behalf of the researcher, all participants were social science students of the same college.
- As the respondents knew the researcher (their senior in college), it may have clouded the answers given by the respondents as well as analysis done by the researcher.

Conclusion:

4.1 Discussion: The study conducted by American Association for Public Opinion Research, analysed by Yang (1997) divided the data into 12 broad areas some of which were a) the acceptability or morality of homosexual behavior b) affective responses to homosexuality and c) civil rights protections and civil liberties for lesbians and gays. Similarly, the findings of this research can be divided into two broad areas; a) the acceptability or morality of homosexual behavior and b) equal rights for

homosexuals. More often than not perceptions on sensitive and controversial subjects as these are useful for political persuasion or to create social impact for bringing about social change. Therefore, interviews or discussions are more often than not, measured or analyzed by way of clustering for the sake of pattern recognition. The literature reviewed for the purpose of this study has a comparable analysis with the data collected. Since, the literature reviewed does not cover young people's attitudes or Indian youth perceptions of homosexuality, it is difficult to compare findings in actuality, but it can be said that the concerns and issues about stereotyping homosexuality, discussed in the literature are identical to the questions that are raised in the young minds.

4.2 Recommendations: More research into public attitudes is needed as homosexuality remains a contentious issue worldwide. Inter-generational research, or data available on generational cohorts will lead to an improved generalization of attitudes of even small samples.

End Notes :

1. (2013, 04 04). Retrieved from American Psychological Association: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sexual-orientation.aspx>
2. Nelson, D. (2009, 07 02). Retrieved from The Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india>
3. Bedi, R. (2011, 07 0). Retrieved from The Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india>
4. Likert scale is a psychometric scale commonly involved in research that employs questionnaires.

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