

# 5

## Straight Expectations

### *Interviews, Interpretations, Interventions*

In this chapter, I have clustered the responses of my interview subjects around key themes that pervade this book and which I will further address in the concluding chapter. I conducted 32 interviews, of which, seven were conducted exclusively online, five were conducted both online and offline and three were begun online but completed offline. The remaining 17 were both arranged and conducted completely offline.

Individuals interviewed for this book comprised professionals and students from different fields (law, academia, medicine, media, stock trading, engineering). The age groupings were as follows—13 were between 20 to 29 years of age, 11 were between 30 to 39, six were between 40 to 49 and one was in his fifties. Half of those interviewed had graduate degrees (either Masters, postgraduate diplomas or Ph.Ds), 25 per cent held undergraduate Bachelor degrees and the others were continuing college students at either the undergraduate or graduate level. Five of the respondents were located out of India (in the US, Canada and UK). The others were from within India. Of these, most (80 per cent) were located in Bombay and the others across other metropolitan cities like New Delhi, Bangalore and Ahmedabad. Six respondents were members of Gay Bombay's managing committee—the *core group*, while seven respondents were actively involved in activism or gay organizations other than Gay Bombay, which included the Humsafar Trust and *Bombay Dost* magazine, protest rallies, workshops, legal activism and documentation. The remaining respondents were not directly involved in organizing Gay Bombay community events or activism at large.

Two thirds of the respondents declared that they were single. Of the others, seven were in same-sex relationship while three were in heterosexual marriage relationships. Half of the respondents were *selectively out*

(mostly to close friends, but not family and or at the workplace). Of the remaining, three were *closeted*; the others were completely *out* to their families as well as at their work places. Over half of the respondents classified themselves as Hindu. Among other religions represented were Islam (three respondents), Christianity (three respondents), Zoroastrianism (two respondents), Jainism (two respondents) and Buddhism (one respondent). Three respondents declared that they had no religious affiliation whatsoever, three considered themselves to be atheist and one person declared himself agnostic. I think that my ethnoscape is reasonably diverse on most counts; however, it may seem weak in terms of the number of married gay men interviewed (only three) and those who consider themselves completely closeted (three). I found it very hard to find willing interviewees in both these categories, either online or offline.

As I have mentioned earlier, I have used pseudonyms to disguise my interviewee names and or email or newsgroup identities or chat handles. I have also used gender appropriate pronouns while describing the respondents, based on their declared gender orientation. Wherever I have used online or offline conversation or interview excerpts, I have either cut and pasted them verbatim from my saved records, or reproduced them within quotation marks. I have not edited the excerpts for minor grammatical or spelling errors; I want their original flavour to be retained and reflected within this book. (For more detailed interviewee profiles, kindly refer to the Appendix).

## BEING GAY IN INDIA

Becoming gay or, rather, becoming aware of being gay is an organic process. More men in India are seeing themselves and their lives reflected in this idea and the individual testimonies often give a hint of the evolution within people's lives of that consciousness. (Jeremy Seabrook, 1999)<sup>1</sup>

Many people whom I interviewed considered their homosexuality to be normal, natural and just another personal choice. It was something that was intrinsic, 'as much a way of life as brushing your teeth in the morning or breathing' (Bhuvan). Others were grappling with self-acceptance.

- MOHNISH: I AM GAY THOUGH I WOULDN'T LIKE PEOPLE TO CALL ME GAY, HOMO, QUEER, ANYTHING; IT IS STILL CONSIDERED ABNORMAL. I DON'T WEAR THE LABEL WITH PRIDE.
- ORMUS: TO SOME EXTENT, ASKING ME WHAT MY PERSONAL VIEWS ON HOMOSEXUALITY ARE IS EQUIVALENT TO ASKING A JEWISH MAN IN A 1940S GERMAN CONCENTRATION CAMP ABOUT HIS VIEWS ON JUDAISM. DESPITE THE COMPLETE ACCEPTANCE OF ONE'S OWN NORMALITY, THE MANY WHIPS OF THE NAZI COMMANDANT CANNOT BUT CARRY THEIR OWN STING. NEVERTHELESS, THE MOMENTS WHEN I WISH I WEREN'T GAY ARE GROWING FEWER AND FEWER. THE PATH THAT I MUST FOLLOW, THOUGH ONE THAT WILL VERY FORESEEABLY BE STRUNG WITH OBSTACLES, IS ONE WHOSE ABILITY TO INTIMIDATE ME GROWS LESSER EVERY DAY.

For some respondents, being gay denoted a political stance or signified a social identity. A few considered it to be just a desire, or equated it with the sexual act—'Just sex, over and out. I know what I want. Seven inches and above' (Harbhajan). For others, it extended beyond their sexual urge into what Adam (2000) describes as the 'potential for emotional involvement and relationships'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Asim, Mike, Yudhisthir and Mohnish portrayed being gay as being comfortable with one's own self, a state of mind, a spirit of being, a way of life, something that was both emotional as well as physical, as opposed to *homosexuality*, which was something just physical. Some respondents did not see the point in differentiating between the terminology of *homosexual* and *gay* (Nihar—'Gay, queer, homosexual, potato, *batata*; it is all the same'; Rahim—'It is just men doing other men'), but for others, *homosexual* was a significant boundary that had to be crossed on the way to being considered *gay*. Jasjit differentiated between sexuality as a practice and as a lifestyle when he defined homosexuality as 'an innate personal trait that may or may not be translated into a conscious lifestyle decision'.

Most respondents noted that being gay in India carried its own unique set of connotations and experiences, mainly because of the cultural, social and religious structures, and family pressures that insist on conformity to traditional patriarchal, heteronormative values. Still, almost all were confident that India was becoming more open to the idea of homosexuality, although they qualified that this change was confined largely to urban areas and came accompanied by many riders.

- JASJIT: *OPEN IS A DECEPTIVE WORD IN MY OPINION—THE PARADIGMS OF SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE IT CONNOTES ARE ESSENTIALLY ROOTED IN WESTERN THINKING AND BASED ON INDIVIDUALISM AND RATIONALITY. PEOPLE IN INDIA HAVE VIEWED IT DIFFERENTLY...*
- VIDWAN: *TO A LARGE EXTENT, THE INDIAN WAY OF LOOKING AT QUEERNESS IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE WAY THE WEST SEES IT. THERE SEEMS TO BE A LOT MORE ACCEPTANCE OR AT LEAST TOLERANCE OF QUEERNESS IN INDIA AS LONG AS IT DOES NOT COME IN THE WAY OF HETEROSEXUAL PROCREATIVE ACTIVITY. THE RECENT VISIBILITY GIVEN TO AN OVERTLY POLITICIZED SEXUAL IDENTITY IS WHAT IS EXTREMELY UNNERVING FOR MANY WHO SEE THEIR PRESENT POSITIONS IN SOCIETY, COMPROMISED BY A QUESTIONING OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY. AND YET, THERE IS CHANGE, MUCH OF IT POSITIVE—A LOT OF IT, COMING FROM THE ENGLISH MEDIA. IN URBAN HIP CULTURES, HOMOSEXUALITY IS FINE AND SO IS HAVING GAY FRIENDS, BUT SOME OF THE OLDER ATTITUDES PERSIST, SOMETIMES UNKNOWINGLY.*

Many respondents echoed Vidwan's assertion that gay men in India could easily compromise with straight society by existing 'within the confines of a heterosexual framework' (Pratham). However, for others, this 'silent acceptance' (Rahim) was a mirage, 'an existence in invisibility', (Senthil) that would be shattered with increased visibility, which in turn would almost certainly lead to 'more pronounced homophobia' (Nihar).

- JASJIT: *BEING GAY AND INDIAN WOULD, IN A TRADITIONAL CULTURAL SENSE, MEAN HAVING SEX WITH A MEMBER OF SAME SEX MORE AS A HOBBY OR PASSION (SHAUK IN HINDI), RATHER THAN TO TURN IT AN IDENTITY ISSUE, WHICH IS A POST-MODERN VIEW OF HOMOSEXUALITY, SO FAR AS INDIA IS CONCERNED. THUS, MANY INDIAN GAYS WOULD HAPPILY GET MARRIED AND HAVE FAMILIES. FAMILIAL GENDER BIAS AND THE GENERAL LACK OF INDIVIDUALISTIC THOUGHT, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO WOMEN, HELP SUPPORT SUCH A SITUATION. ALSO, THE GENERAL MASS OF GAY INDIANS ARE QUITE UNAWARE OF THE HISTORICITY OF THEIR SEXUAL PREDILECTION AND SO IS THE SOCIETY AT LARGE—SO THE MAIN HOMOPHOBIC AGENDA FOR INDIANS CAN BE THAT BEING GAY IS ESSENTIALLY A WESTERN (LESS CHAUVINIST) OR ISLAMIC (MORE CHAUVINIST)*

PHENOMENON AND IT NEVER EXISTED IN INDIA! THERE MOST CERTAINLY IS A UNIQUE GAY CULTURE. INDIVIDUAL TRAITS, WHICH IN TURN ARE CONVERTED INTO SOCIAL TRAITS THAT FOSTER AND CHERISH IT, ARE NARCISSISM, CHAUVINISM, ESCAPISM AND INDIVIDUALISM. OF COURSE THERE CAN BE MANY MORE, OFTEN HAVING THEIR OWN DIALECTIC (THESIS-ANTITHESIS-SYNTHESIS), RHETORIC AND POLITIC DYNAMICS.

RAHIM: A LOT OF GAY MEN ARE FINDING COMFORT IN THAT SPACE, WHICH SAYS—DO EVERYTHING, BUT BE QUIET! IF YOU ARE GAY, REMAIN GAY. IT'S OKAY. JUST DON'T WALK ON THE ROAD WAVING A FLAG. I HAVE A FRIEND, A GAY COUPLE, WHO HAVE BEEN LIVING FOR TEN YEARS IN A BUILDING SOCIETY. EVERYONE IN THE SOCIETY AND THEIR WORKPLACE KNOWS THAT THEY ARE A COUPLE BUT IT IS NOT TALKED ABOUT. IT GIVES THEM A GREAT SENSE OF COMFORT THAT WE ARE NOT A HOMOPHOBIC SOCIETY. THESE GUYS HAVE FOUND COMFORT IN A SOCIETY THAT IS WILLING TO OVERLOOK THEIR RELATIONSHIP AS LONG AS IT IS NOT ACKNOWLEDGED. WE ARE NOT A HOMOPHOBIC SOCIETY AS LONG AS EVERYTHING IS QUIET. THE MOMENT I GET UP AND SAY I WANT AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT I AM GAY AND AT PAR AS ANYONE ELSE IN SOCIETY, IS WHEN THE PROBLEM COMES UP.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that this *contract of silence* (Ashok Row Kavi, 1999)<sup>3</sup> existing in India is similar to the situation that prevailed in the West in the early and mid 20th century, where typically the gay son would leave home as soon as he could, 'both to move to a larger city and to keep his secret from kin' (Sanders, 2004).<sup>4</sup> In India, leaving home is an option that is rarely exercised, but even if this happens (as with Bhuvan, Yudhisthir and some of my other interviewees), the shadow of family continues to loom large in influencing the lives and decisions of gay men.

JASJIT: A PERSON'S EXISTENTIAL NOTIONS ARE STILL ROOTED INTO THE FAMILY AS OPPOSED TO THE INDIVIDUAL. SO THE FAMILY'S ROLE, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO IDENTITY-BASED ISSUES LIKE *COMING OUT* FOR EXAMPLE, CAN BE CRUCIAL.

RANDHIR: THE MANIFESTATION OF THIS IN THE LIVES OF SAME-SEX ATTRACTED PERSONS IS MOST PROFOUNDLY FELT IN THE AREA OF (HETEROSEXUAL) MARRIAGE, WHERE THE PERSON