Sexuality is often explained conceptually as being inherently fluid. This implies that it can be experienced differently over time by the same person, or differently by...
people in the same social group but at different stages in their lives. In this context, it seems pertinent to talk about the issues of ageing and ageism in the queer communities of India. I had an opportunity to speak on the issue at the Ageing, Ageism and Cultures National Conference hosted by Jadavpur University in Kolkata. I presented a preliminary paper titled *Never Say Dye? Indian Queer Movement Responses to Ageing and Ageism*, on which this article is based.

In focussing on the queer context, I realize that it is a vast canvas. So let me narrow it down to the context of gay (and to some extent bisexual) identified men in India, though it will still be preposterous to say that I can speak on behalf of all such men in India. ‘Gay’ is how I have identified for a long time and still do, though perhaps with a flagging degree of passion, and so I will take this leeway to focus on the issue of ageing and ageism among gay men, urban ones to be more specific but not necessarily English speaking ones.

For the preliminary paper, I looked at how ageing and ageism have been addressed by the queer movements in Kolkata (and India) in the 1990s and 2000s, mainly through a brief analysis of articles published in queer publications like *Trikone*, *Pravartak* and *Bombay Dost*. I found only a few articles over a period of more than 20 years that explicitly addressed these issues.[1] Nonetheless if we look deeper into the texts, there is some food for thought.

Older gay men seemed particularly vulnerable to age-related discrimination within queer social spaces, and unfortunately this could also include queer support forums. For instance, Counsel Club, one of India’s earliest queer support forums, over a five-year period of 1993-98 had no more than 15% of its core group members above the age of 40 years (and almost entirely all male).[2] Some restrictive and others liberatory, to our expressions of sexuality. The November issue of *In Plainspeak* explores how time and sexuality interact, be it in the moments that mark individual lives or the larger public histories that shape entire societies.

**UPCOMING ISSUES:**

**December 2017**

**Freedom and Sexuality**

What would it be like to have no limits when it comes to expressing sexuality? No societal stigma, no familial, societal or governmental control – just the freedom to articulate and pursue one’s thoughts, emotions and desires? But the reality is that sexuality is heavily regulated by institutions like the state, religion and the family. This issue of *In Plainspeak* explores what it could mean to freely experience and assert the right to sexual agency. It also reflects on current barriers to this freedom and the ways that it is asserted or denied, based on gender, caste, sexual orientation and more. It challenges readers to imagine new frontiers in sexual expression and the ways we can cross them, and get to where we want to be.

**January 2018**

**Anniversary issue**

For the past four years, *In Plainspeak* has published articles highlighting the diversity of issues related to sexuality in the Global South and the universal importance of sexuality. We’ve explored the ways that sexuality is connected to many different concepts – some which were evident and others that were a bit more surprising. The January...
Age-related discrimination in queer publications could often be related to a premium placed on 'good looks', 'fitness' and 'ableism' at large. It was not as if gay men above 40 did not figure in the articles and visuals published in the period mentioned. But a quick comparison, especially of the visuals, would show that they were there mostly because of ‘accomplishments in life’, compared to younger gay men who could feature, among other reasons, simply because of the glamour of youth. In any case the default depiction of male-to-male sex and love always featured young and chiselled bodies.

The statistic of Counsel Club’s core group membership could also be related to the fact that there were fewer gay men above 40 in the group. But that also begs the question as to why. Was it that older gay men did not need social support as much as younger men? Older gay men were also more likely to be married. Did this mean that they had greater social support and fewer issues around loneliness? We can’t be certain, but what was quite clear was that married gay men did face discrimination in queer spaces.

In the articles I reviewed, there was appreciation of the social pressures around compulsory heterosexual marriage. There was also criticism of the stand many married gay men involved in same-sex relationships seemed to take when they said, “My wife should have nothing to complain about, I’m a good provider”. Yet, there seemed to be an equal amount of the simplistic expectation that gay men must be able to resist marriage because they were men. So ageism around the combination of old age and marriage was undeniable. We could also add to that the confusion around and gay men’s judging of bisexual people and suspecting them of not being trustworthy (this extends to gay men married to women also, who may be behaviourally bisexual because of their social situation), but that probably deserves a separate analysis.
This brings me to another aspect that stood out in the articles. At least one of the articles talked about the advantages of experience, foresight and greater access to resources that some older gay men enjoyed compared to younger ones, especially in the context of inter-generational relationships. At this point, it seems apt to draw upon analogies from Bollywood. In the department of looks and appearance, the Marc Zubers and Vinod Khannas seemed to hold as much sway on the younger gay men as ‘chocolate boy’ good looks did on the older ones. So it was not as if the potential for unequal sharing of power and possible exploitation in such relationships was unidirectional.

The articles also reflected the ‘fear of old age’ among younger gay men – not just in terms of what the future would hold, but also in terms of insecurity around ‘losing ground’ in the here and now. The articles reviewed did not quite explore in detail what the ramification of such insecurity was on the mental health, and by extension the sexual health, of younger gay men, but it could not have been positive, especially with the backdrop of the HIV epidemic. The articles did, however, talk about suicide and suicide attempts among gay men, and this did not seem limited to any age bracket.

The question that arises is what has been done about these issues in relation to the well-being of older (and younger) gay men – especially by civil society organizations (NGOs, CBOs) and to some extent by the government as well? In terms of government responses, there have been none through conscious policy interventions, and we need not even bring in Section 377 as an obvious obstacle into the picture. The National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) and its affiliate civil society programmes over the years that have worked with men who have sex with men (MSM) in spite of Section 377 have hardly looked at issues specific to gay men above 40. NACP’s new HIV strategic response plan[3] tries to take into account the
vulnerability of youth among MSM and other most vulnerable populations, though this too is a recent phenomenon.[4] But there is no specific mention of older age-groups, apart from a general mention that anyone in the sexually active age group of 15-49 years has greater vulnerability to HIV exposure and infection.

Once again looking back at what queer support forums like Counsel Club and Humsafar Trust did in the 1990s and 2000s, there was an acknowledgement of the specific needs of younger individuals approaching the forums. In 1996, after Counsel Club received a large number of letters from queer youth (around 18 to 25 years of age) through a sexual health column published in a newspaper, a separate circle was created to discuss youth-specific issues.[5] This venture lasted only for some time, but nothing parallel was ever thought of specifically for people above 40.

Are there more options for older gay (and bisexual) men today for a better social life? A look at the attendance at gyms and fitness centres may show a significant presence of older men (including queer ones). Older queer men may be more visible on social media as well, but a quick count on two of the Facebook pages of queer-oriented forums I am associated with show that the participation of older age groups (35 and above) is not even half that of the younger ones (late teens up to mid-30s). Anecdotally, older queer men at rainbow parties is still not a common sight and as one bisexual friend in his early 60s says, the participation in the parties is so overwhelmingly young that it feels better not to attend.

Of course, these aspects deserve detailed research and closer scrutiny. But even what is visible does point out at the need for greater psycho-social support for older individuals, indeed age-specific support for individuals across the age spectrum. The recent legislation on mental health[6] has acknowledged the issues of gender identity
and sexual orientation along with an emphasis on the right to health and non-discrimination. This may sound like a huge leap of imagination, faith and practicality, but at least this legislation provides a framework in which we can begin to address the specific concerns of different population groups, among them the mental health issues around both ageing and ageism among gay men.

* * *

[1] Sunset or Sunrise?, Sanjay, Naya Pravartak, August 1997 to May 1998 (9th issue of Counsel Club's house journal); also in the same issue Seasons of Loneliness, Puppee


[4] The ground reality is that MSM below 18 years (minors) are officially not part of the targeted HIV interventions supported by NACO; nor are their specific needs addressed by most youth organizations. So their sexual health needs often tend to remain unaddressed from both sides.


Pawan has been engaged with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and other queer community mobilization in eastern and other parts of India since the early 1990s. He was a founder member of Counsel Club (1993-2002) and “Pravartak” (1991-92, 1993-2000), among the first queer support forums and publications in India. He has studied economics in college, and worked as a journalist, copywriter and social communicator in his early years as a professional. From 2002 to 2014, he was part of SAATHII, an HIV focussed capacity building NGO, at the top management level. He now leads
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