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**Putting the 'B' Back in LGBT:
Bisexuality, Queer Politics and HIV/AIDS Discourse**

by L. Ramakrishnan

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Introduction

Bisexuals and bisexuality are, it seems, nowhere and everywhere at once. Discourse on 'sexual minorities' in India, usually in the context of minority rights and the need for reading down of Section 377, pits homosexuals and transgenders against the gender-normative presumed-heterosexual mainstream. Bisexuality is either not mentioned at all or dismissed as a behavioural consequence of compulsory heterosexuality keeping gays and lesbians in oppressive marriages. On the other hand, public-health discourse around vulnerability to HIV/AIDS often invokes bisexuals as one of the reasons for the HIV virus breaking out of the confinement of at-risk groups and seeping into the general population. And finally there is the occasional sensationalistic magazine article, which includes bed-hopping urban bisexuals in a breathless exposé of permissiveness, modernity and media influences on Indian values.

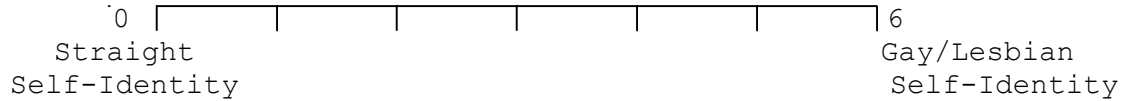
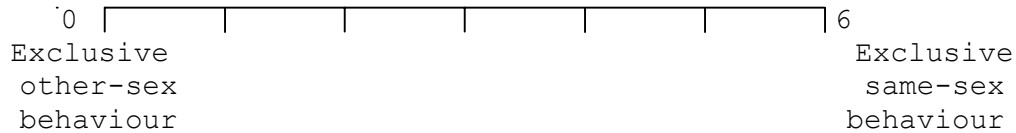
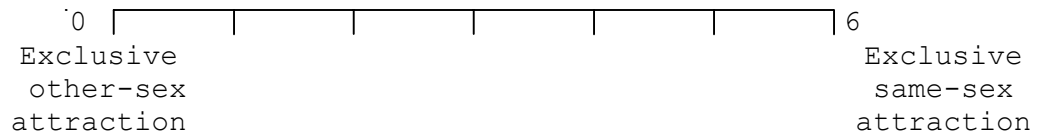
In this essay I explore some of the diversity intrinsic to bisexuality, the 'B' of LGBT. I mention issues faced by bisexuals in the form of biphobia from straight and gay communities and share some thoughts on the relevance of bisexuality to queer politics and HIV/AIDS discourse. I conclude with some recommendations for bi-inclusivity in queer politics and HIV/AIDS interventions. This article is biased towards male bisexuality though many of the issues addressed here apply to male and female bisexuals, but less so to bisexual transgender people.

Who is bisexual?

The textbook definition of bisexuality as attraction to both men and women seems quite straightforward. That is, till you begin to ask - what about the married man who seeks out clandestine encounters with men in Delhi's Connaught Place once a week? The young woman whose long-standing friendship with a cherished *saheli* has just turned exquisitely sexual? The sixteen year-old virgin whose libidinous fantasies revolve around Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Sania Mirza in equal measure? The self-identified lesbian, who, after a decade-long history of exclusive involvement with women, happens to fall in love with a man? The transsexual who experiences a shift in attraction to include members of another sex than was previously the case? Does predominant behaviour, occasional behaviour, fantasy, past experience, who-does-what-to-whom determine one's sexuality? And when does it matter?

Kinsey: A simple framework to interpret the complexity of sexuality is provided by the oft-cited Kinsey scales [ref 1] developed in 1948. According to Kinsey, bisexuals belong somewhere along a continuum extending from exclusive heterosexuality (0) to exclusive homosexuality (6). A score of 3 would indicate equal attraction to men and women. These scales are often constructed separately for *self-identification*, *attraction* and *behaviour*. This means a person could self-identify as heterosexual (Kinsey 0) but fantasize about men and women (Kinsey 1-5).

Kinsey Scales

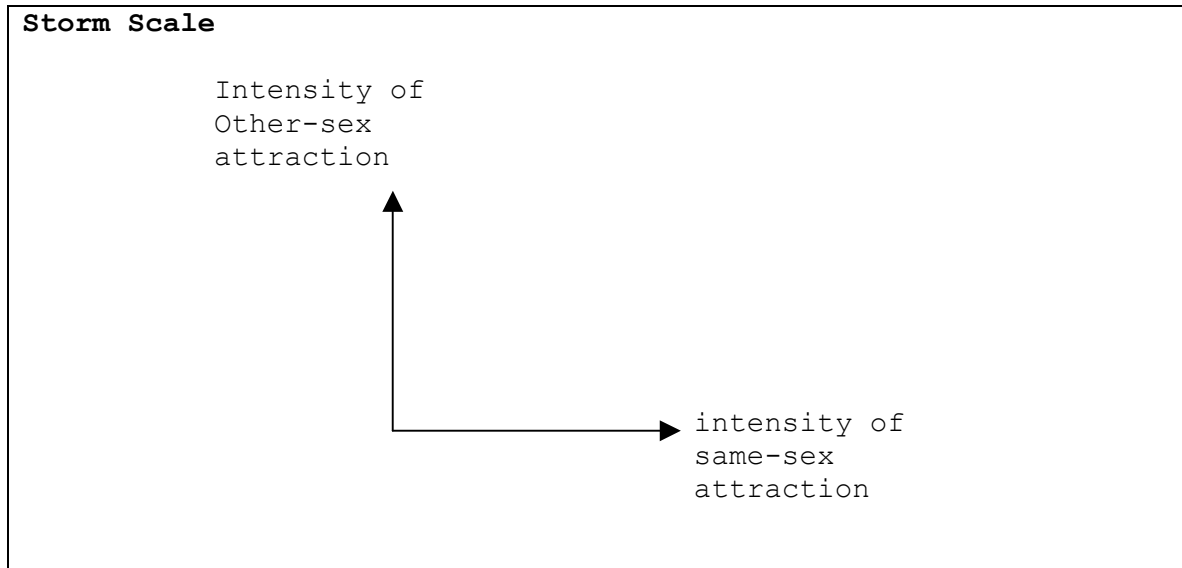


Operationally, self-reported Kinsey attraction scores in the range 2-4 are taken as evidence of 'significant' attraction to men and women in some studies. Contrary to some gay and straight notions of bisexuality, bisexuality does not signify *equal* attraction, simply *significant* attraction. The distinction between identity, behaviour and attraction is an important one with implications for both queer politics and public-health discourse.

Klein: An elaboration of the Kinsey-type classification, the grid proposed by Fritz Klein in 1980, further categorizes a Kinsey-type scale by past, present and ideal situations. The term bisexual would apply to several elements on this grid. While data on the distribution of individuals among these elements are notoriously difficult to obtain, a 1994 report of research carried out at the Harvard School of Public Health found that nearly 21% of the men and 18% of the women studied admitted to same-sex sexual attraction/behaviour at some time in their lives [ref 3].

Storm: The Storm scale treats desire for women and men as two independent axes, and thus acknowledges that intensity of

attraction for members for one sex can vary independently of intensity for the other, a fact that is not apparent from Kinsey scales.



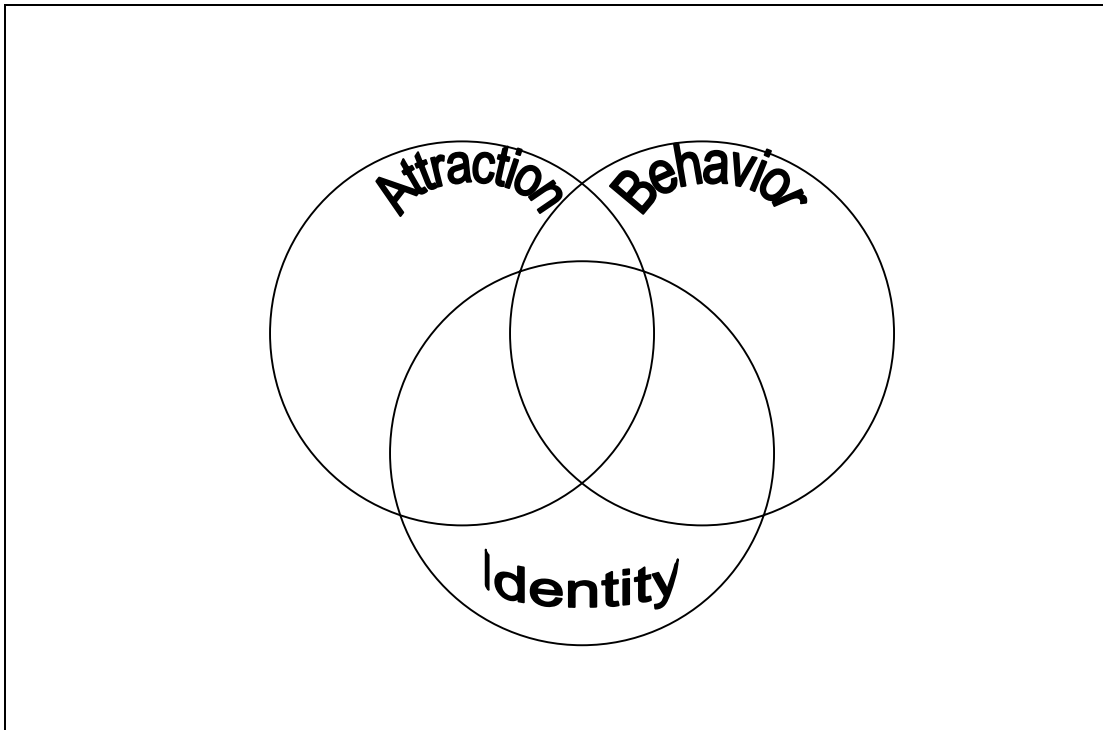
A deficiency of all these classifications, and perhaps, of the term *bisexuality* itself, is that they leave little scope for depicting attraction to transgender, intersexed and other people who challenge the binary sex categories 'male' and 'female' or the gender categories 'man' and 'woman'. For this reason, some prefer to identify as *pansexual* rather than bisexual if their attractions include people from the wider spectrum of genders.

A further complexity not addressed by any of the sexual orientation terms (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) is that it is often not clear if the attraction is towards individuals of a particular sex or a particular gender. Thus there are men who are primarily attracted to femininity in individuals, though the objects of their attraction may be male-bodied or female-bodied. Would such attraction be called Bisexual? Hetero-gendered?

Behaviour-based definitions: For many people, bisexuality is defined by sexual behaviour than by the individual's sexual orientation, identity or lack thereof. Michael Ross, in a 1991 study of bisexuality and HIV/AIDS [ref 4], proposes such categories are 'Defense Bisexuality' in which heterosexual activities are a defense against the stigma of homosexuality, 'Situational Bisexuality' involving incidental same-sex behaviour as might be found in prisons, boarding schools and by married men seeking extramarital release, and 'Latin Bisexuality' in which the insertive role in a same-sex union is nevertheless regarded as heterosexual.

Other definitions: Besides academic categorizations of bisexuality, individuals who possess bisexual identities or inclinations have their own notions of what it means to be bi. For many, it means that gender is unimportant among their criteria of persons to whom they are attracted. This may signify significant attraction to men and women, even though circumstances might dictate that relationships with members of one sex are more likely to occur. For a few, 'bisexual' is a transitional identity, or perceived as a safer way to declare their same-sex orientation than 'gay' or 'lesbian', especially during early stages of the coming-out process.

Given these diverse perceptions of bisexuality, cultural critic and Harvard professor Marjorie Garber [ref 5] questions the legitimacy of subsuming such an enormous variety of sexualities within one category, that of bisexuality. She argues that peoples' erotic lives are often so complex and unpredictable that attempts to label them are necessarily restrictive and inadequate. In her view, the fluidity of bisexuality makes it a concept *beyond* homosexuality and heterosexuality rather than simply a category *between* the two extremes. Valid though this argument may be, bisexual identities can be meaningful in some contexts for reasons described below.



Why identify as anything?

Identities are multi-dimensional, dynamic and contextual. For individuals outside the heterosexual mainstream, they arise

by individuals' acknowledgment to themselves of their own non-normative desires, which may or may not involve assignment of a label such as 'lesbian', 'gay' or 'bi'. I call this *self-or auto-identification*, and distinguish it from *allo-identification*, which involves the additional step of making others aware of one's identity. Allo-identification is achieved via the coming out process. Other people recognize the individual by means of the label accompanying allo-identification, or alternately ascribe a label based on their observations of the individual's behaviour. Part of the motivation for allo-identification and labeling oneself is the need to find a community of individuals who share the same identity.

Allo-identification is most useful when it succeeds in bringing together an assortment of individuals who need the numerical and moral support of each other. It is counter-productive when it fosters negative stereotypes that exacerbate discrimination from those 'outside', as well as divisiveness and parochialism from those 'inside'.

Individuals who allo-identify as bisexual possess a common set of concerns that validate their existence as a community. They share with the gay community the problem of homophobia and the struggle for cultural acceptance in a heterosexually constructed society. In addition, they have their own suite of problems stemming from misperceptions and biphobia on the part of both gay and straight communities. This may explain why many bisexually oriented individuals may actually allo-identify as straight or gay.

Biphobia

Because it challenges the view of same-sex attraction and other-sex attraction as two mutually exclusive phenomena, the existence of bisexuality is problematic to those on either side of the proverbial fence. It provokes reactions from gay/lesbian and straight communities that range from perplexity to discomfort to outright hostility. Common stereotypes [ref 3] about bisexuals include those of the confused heterosexual or closeted homosexual, and the opportunistic and promiscuous individual who will hit on 'anything that moves'. A bisexual who chooses to enter into a relationship with a person of the other sex is seen by the gay/lesbian community as doing so out of the desire for heterosexual privilege, while one who finds a same-sex partner is viewed by both gay/lesbian and straight communities as having really been homosexual all along but afraid to admit it. The probability that a bisexual man will desert his spouse for an individual of the sex other than that of his spouse is considered somehow more threatening than the chance of a straight man leaving his wife for another woman, or a gay man leaving his partner for another man. Ironically, despite the phobia against bi men and their sexuality, female bisexual behaviour is seen by

many straight men as titillating so long as it is merely a precursor for male-female sex - the 'hot bi babe' is a cliched narrative in media that panders to male heterosexual fantasy.

Psychologists trying to establish the innateness and immutability of homosexual orientation tend to ignore, erase or downplay the existence of bisexuality. Two factors contribute to this erasure:

- Many gay men are strongly convinced that bisexuality (especially among men) does not exist. These convictions simply project the common experience of gay men who have allo-identified as bi during early stages of grappling with their homosexuality, and who thus tend to view every bi-identified man as being in that same early phase of coming out (eventually) as gay.
- Many in the gay and lesbian communities rest their claims for acceptance of homosexuality on the premise that sexual orientation is immutable and not a matter of behavioural choice or upbringing. Bisexuality, to the extent that it invokes the notion of choice with respect to gender of partner, challenges this premise and complicates such simple explanations based on biological determinism.

Bisexual identities and behaviours in South Asian society

How does the foregoing discussion, based largely on sexuality defined in the 'Western' context where the term first gained currency, pertain to South Asian society? The discourse around bisexual *allo-identities* in the contemporary South Asian context is nascent. In a society where marriage and begetting progeny are exalted as sacred duties of every individual, even many of those who are exclusively inclined towards homosexuality end up getting married: some even do so of their own volition. In such circumstances, bisexual allo-identification is probably even more limited than gay or lesbian allo-identification.

Further, a behaviour-based understanding of bisexuality tends to predominate in urban middle-class South Asian gay and lesbian communities, where 'bisexual' is more often a statement about the same-sex attracted person being married to someone of the other sex, than about that person's sexual orientation per se. Thus one finds 'bisexual' being used synonymously with 'married gay' or 'married lesbian', contributing to further misunderstanding about bisexuality as a sexual orientation.

On the other hand, the topic of bisexual *behaviour* is inseparable from any discourse on sexuality, marriage, public-health concerns or the human rights movements of South Asia.

There is abundant literature suggesting that sexual behaviour is much more fluid here than in the west. Opportunities for homoerotic encounters abound in this society because socialization with members of the same sex is enacted [ref 7] and anticipated in its cultures to a much greater extent than in western ones. Being straight in South Asia is not anything like being straight in the US and other cultures. Insertive behaviour is perceived as non-homosexual and non-penetrative homosexual behaviour as play: the Latin bisexual [ref 4] and the South Asian bisexual are not too different in this respect!

Married bisexual men and women will likely be a characteristic feature of the South Asian queer landscapes for many more years to come. They may even play prominent roles in the nascent movements for gay and lesbian rights. Countless others will, of course, remain invisible, immersed in the *samsaara saagara* (ocean of worldly existence) that constitutes family life in South Asia.

Bisexual identities and behaviours in South Asian diaspora

Some of these observations about bisexual behaviour in South Asia probably hold true for the diaspora as well. However, rigid sexuality roles common in western cities can restrict the scope for same-sex behaviour to people situated within the mainstream gay culture or its South Asian-flavoured counterpart. Allo-identification with the gay culture is to be found, and is rendered visible via the numerous organizations, newsletters and conferences that have sprung up within the last decade. The South Asian settled abroad is often quite preoccupied with issues of identity, located as (s)he is at the bewildering intersection of many spaces referenced by race, culture, religion and sexuality.

Sandip Roy-Chowdhury's [ref 8] article suggests that a few individuals within the South Asian diasporic communities are coming out of their homosexual or heterosexual closets and proclaiming their bisexual identity. This number is vanishingly small, in proportion to those allo-identifying as straight or even as gay. Why is this so? The South Asian diasporic gay identity demands a vehement rejection of the normative heterosexual allo-identity of the homeland, one that is linked to images of unhappy marriages, deception, and emotional strife. This reaction further vitiates conventional (western) stereotypes of bisexuality to produce a uniquely South Asian incarnation of biphobia. Self-identified bisexuals who see themselves as part of the movement against oppression of sexuality-minorities would rather allo-identify as gay to escape this biphobia. In doing so,

they are, in effect, emerging from one closet only to enter another.

Bisexuality and HIV/AIDS discourse

In HIV/AIDS discourse, where attention centers on the relative importance of various modes of transmission, sexuality is defined in behavioural terms. Thus in India, the primary mode of transmission is defined to be heterosexual (read: from men to women and vice-versa). In this context, male bisexuality (read: bisexual behaviour) is vilified as one of the routes for transmission from the 'high-risk' groups, to the 'general population'.

The term MSM (*males who have sex with males* or *men who have sex with men*) coined by epidemiologists attempts to skirt the frequent disconnect between identity, orientation and behaviour, and the cultural-specificity of identity terms, by defining the target population in purely behavioural terms. By this definition, MSM would include men who are exclusively homosexual in behaviour as well as men who are sexual with men, women, and transgender people). It would also include men whose attractions may lie anywhere on the Kinsey scale, and men of many sexual identities (whether or not these are self-assigned) including kothi, panthi, double-decker, gay and bisexual. Thus it would appear that MSM is a more useful concept than terms such as 'gay' and 'bisexual'.

In practice however, work on HIV prevention is largely carried out through 'targeted interventions' developed for various high-risk groups, including MSM. These MSM-focused interventions invariably address only a small fraction of the diverse MSM populations, primarily the kothis and double-deckers. The majority of MSM who are gender-normative (termed panthis) and indistinguishable from the general population are inadequately addressed in these MSM interventions. Prevention and Awareness messages aimed at the 'general population' do not address male-to-male sexual routes for most part. Further, doctors and counselors at Voluntary Counseling and Testing Centers (VCTC) and Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) clinics rarely ask their clients about male-to-male sexual behaviours unless the clients are obviously feminine or transgender.

Bi-sensitive HIV/AIDS interventions

Lessons well learnt in the bi movement (succinctly captured in the phrase **ASSUME NOTHING**) indicate that we would be remiss to draw inferences about an individual's sexual orientation based on present/past/future behaviour or identity. These lessons can inform HIV/AIDS interventions in some of the following ways:

1. It would be better to avoid terms such as bisexual transmission, homosexual transmission and heterosexual transmission as these terms risk stigmatizing all people of particular sexual orientations. Speaking of specific routes of transmission is preferable (e.g. Male-to-male, male-to-female) and more accurate.
2. It is not adequate to target the identifiable/reachable subsets of the MSM populations for HIV prevention messages relating to male-to-male sex. Rather, it is essential to include messages on male-to-male behaviours as a route of viral transmission in campaigns and public service messages being delivered to the 'general population'.
3. Health-care providers and counselors providing services to populations at-risk or infected by HIV/AIDS would be well advised to drop their assumptions about probable routes of transmission based on the (male) patient's gender presentation as masculine or feminine. Thus even the most masculine of patients ought to be counselled about the risks involved in unprotected male-to-male sex **and** male-to-female sex, without assuming that the former would not apply to them.

Bi-inclusivity and queer politics

Perplexed by the diversity of bisexuality, the straight or gay/ lesbian reader may well ask, what do bisexuals really want with respect to inclusion in the queer movement? The following points [13] are offered in response:

1. Unlearn binary thinking. To paraphrase Alfred Kinsey, the world is not divided into sheep and goats. Further, if you consider it homophobic when straight folks erase homosexuality and assume everyone around them is - or should be - heterosexual; then acknowledge that it is biphobic when you erase bisexuality and assume everyone around you is - or should be - gay or straight.
2. Do not assume 'gay and lesbian' is a sufficient descriptor for the LGBT community any more than you would assume using the word 'gay' is sufficient to make lesbians feel included, or that urban middle-class queer cultures are a sufficient representation of queer cultures in the country or region.
3. Just as some women use both 'gay' and 'lesbian' to describe themselves, yet others use both 'lesbian' and 'bisexual' to describe themselves. If in doubt about who identifies as what, assume there are bisexuals present in every group of queers. We often are.

4. The sexual orientation of people cannot be inferred by the sex/gender of their partner. Just as a person may be gay/lesbian and single, a person may be bisexual and in a same-sex relationship, bisexual and single, or bisexual and in an other-sex relationship. Thus a 'lesbian' relationship may include women of whom one or both are bisexually identified and/or oriented.

5. Usage of the term 'same-sex relationship' is preferable to 'gay/lesbian relationship' because the latter has come to imply that both partners are gay/lesbian while in reality that may not be the case. Ditto for other-sex relationships, in which one or both partners may be bisexual.

6. Bisexuals are not the latest pesky addition to a bestiary of alternate sexuality types clamoring for greater inclusion. We have been around as long as homosexuals, and have been part of queer culture whether or not we have chosen to identify ourselves as bi.

7. Naming and honoring bi- and trans- sexualities is not merely a matter of political correctness or minding one's P's and Q's. It is about us queers showing the same regard for diversity and complexity that we demand - and rightfully so - from our communities of origin, and from the world at large.

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