

# Abused Sexuality- Experience of Sexuality Post Experiences of Sexual Abuse

## Case Report

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**Sunanda Jalote\***

Research Scholar, Ambedkar University, India

\*Corresponding author: Sunanda Jalote's, Research Scholar, Ambedkar University, India

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## Abstract

Sexual abuse has been happening from times immemorial and is that brutal aspect of society which also talk about spirituality, peace and harmony in the same breath. Youth gets irrevocably scarred by such childhood traumas which linger on in their adult life too. In the present study, an effort was made to study and understand how heterosexual and queer youth in contemporary middle class in Delhi explore the relationship sexual abuse survivors have with their own sexuality and how their negotiate their sexual selves. The secondary aim of the study was to investigate the function and effects of guilt, shame, desire, fantasies and gender roles in their lives and how, if at all, they connect to the experiences of sexual assault suffered by individuals within this socio-cultural group. The approach that frames this study is a discourse analytic approach and this is seen as central to the methodology of this study and the language used to talk about the findings and implications of this research.

**Keywords:** Spirituality; Sexuality; Sexual abuse; Guilt; Shame; Childhood trauma

## Introduction

The term sexuality has various connotations for researchers across the world and one of them, namely, Wendy Hollway opines that there are three broad discourses on sexuality which are the Male Sexual Drive Discourse, the Have/ Hold Discourse and the Permissive Discourse [1]. These discourses attempt to analyse the self of one partner in relation to and emanating from an understanding of the other.

In general, these discourses look at the interpersonal dealings of sexual partners based on their understanding of themselves and the other in a subject – object paradigm. But, it should be remembered that these discourses aren't completely separate or mutually exclusive entities. They can merge and flow through one another.

Hollway [1] mentions this in terms of one's own life-how you could grow up in say a small town where you as a woman linked sex to love and marriage and then went to a big city where feminism taught and convinced you that women too can also have sexual needs same as men.

So you may call yourself feminist and free except that you also find that casual sex does not really interest you- you are still located in the have hold discourse even while in the permissive discourse. Thus discourse analysis allows for contradictions in subjectivity, something that mainstream psychology does not allow for.

## Cultural understanding of sexuality

In the cultural understanding of sexuality Sudhir Kakar [2] provides good insight into sexuality in the Indian context. According to Kakar [2] the Indian woman as a person in her individual right shorn of all relational contexts is viewed simply as

a "bhog ki cheez", or an object to be devoured [2]. Outside of and separate from a definition by extension located in the patriarchal construct and emanating from the man the woman becomes overtly objectified to be used and discarded [2]. Or she is the wife and the wife is not a sexual being; she is a wife or a mother. Kakar's allusion to "bhog ki cheez" is a direct quote from a statement made by and publicly acknowledged as being attributable to the president of India.

## Perception of the abuse

How a survivor perceives his or her experience of abuse is very important. According to Kathryn Hall, this perception often differs between genders, ages, etc.

Enumerated below are different case studies of individuals who faced sexual abuse during childhood.

**Case 1:** Arun is a 24 year old homosexual male who, in his own words, had 'non-consensual penetrative sex' with another man when he was 18. The other man was a janitor in Arun's school, was much older than Arun, and married with two kids. Arun detailed that he was the one who pursued the janitor in order to explore his sexuality with different types of people; different looks, physicality's, backgrounds, personality etc.

Arun never categorizes his abuse as actual abuse. When I first spoke to him, I told him about the area of my research, that I was studying sexuality, specifically of 'survivors' due to an interest which had started because of friends of mine who are survivors and how I saw them make sense of their sexuality and sex lives. After detailing the research topic, I started the interview [3].

**Sunanda:** Can you talk a little but about what happened with you?

**Arun:** That's what I'm saying. 'Survivor; would be a huge...even

when you hear the word 'survivor' you imagine something huge happened to him and he survived it. I don't think I would classify under that.

**Sunanda:** What do you think you would classify under?

**Arun:** A 'normal' kind of sex, but a non-consensual sex...a situation where I did not want to be penetrated but I was.

**Sunanda:** So who was this person, how old were you when this happened?

**Arun:** I was 18 when this happened and the person was my school janitor...

**Sunanda:** Okay...he was much older than you?

**Arun:** He was married. But the thing is...the sex...was...I was very aware of what was happening. Let me just make it very clear. I was very aware of what was happening and I had limited the access for lack of a better word. I was not umm.... There were certain things I was comfortable with and certain things I was not.

**Sunanda:** So what were the things which you were comfortable with, to start with?

**Arun:** Kissing was okay...and...Umm...uh...you understand bases?

**Sunanda:** yeah of course

**Arun:** Till third base is good. Up to third base everything was fine, everything was consensual. So...not sex because I was not ready ad I had never done but he penetrated me anyway.

Here, Arun says the sex was non-consensual sex, but does not classify it as sexual abuse. The terms 'normal' are used in the same sentence as 'non-consensual'. He doesn't see himself as a 'survivor' because he doesn't see it as abuse at all. Later Arun detailed how he pursued the janitor despite not having any response to his advances in the beginning and though he did not see the penetration as rape. Arun says he was comfortable till third base, which is oral sex. He wanted to explore his sexuality with the janitor, but the forced penetration was something he was just not ready for. Arun later goes on to say that the experience had a huge impact on him.

**Arun:** It was quite impactful in the way that I began questioning what the fuck I was doing, I began questioning my own sexuality. Maybe I was not meant for this, maybe I'm meant to be with girls.

Clearly, the experience was very traumatizing for Arun. Throughout the interview he clearly states that he had known that he was interested in men even as a child and though he had also been attracted to women for a time, it was never replaced his attraction towards men. The only time he questioned whether or not he was attracted to men was after this incident. This says, to me, that though verbally Arun does not accept the incident as rape or assault of any kind, the impact it had on him was quite powerful.

**Case 2:** Renuka is a 20 year old female undergraduate student. Being a sociology student she is very aware of sexual rights, abuse, and personal rights. Renuka talks about multiple one-time incidents which have happened to her spread over her childhood

[4].

**Renuka:** This one time I was in rishikesh with my family and I was 4 or 5 then and we were in a bus from rishikesh to haridwar... I was sitting with my grandfather, there was a guy next to me, his mother next to him. And my grandfather was talking to my mother who was on the other side. It usually never happened that they would let me sit with a stranger and at that point because they were distracted talking to the family. And the guy had his hands down my pants the whole time.

Renuka felt clear about the fact that to her, abuse wasn't always when there was some unwanted touch. It was anything which made her feel uncomfortable and had a sexual aspect to it. For example,

**Renuka:** So you know how the front seat of an ambassador is elongated, I was sitting there with my grandfather and my uncle and there were three ladies in the back, my mother, grandmother and masi and I wanted to sit in the front so there was no other space for me to sit other than next to the driver where the great box is and I was sitting there and sometime during the journey we had stopped to eat and I was in the car with my masi sitting peeche and the rest of them had gone to get stuff from wherever and my masi was talking on the phone so I don't think she realized what was happening and the guy pulled out his dick and showed it to me. He basically had it in his hands. I just have vague flashbacks but he didn't touch me but he was showing it to me in a very obscene way and I remember not telling anyone because I dint know what the hell it was.

Renuka also mentioned another incident when she was a young child playing hide and seek with her friends and was hiding behind the tree of a park. She reiterated the situation where a guy rode up behind her on a bike and started peeing at her feet, but not at her. She hadn't seen him as her back faced him, but when she turned around, she saw the man smiling at her. She said the following about this situation

**Renuka:** And I do think that that is a way of abuse and violation

Renuka seems very clear that 'abuse' constitutes of any act which isn't necessarily aggressive but can be passively sexual and makes her feel uncomfortable and violated.

**Case 3:** Myra's case is different from both Arun and Renuka. Myra is a 22 year old recently graduated student of psychology. She is clear that she had been molested as a child, but the memories of the details are blocked. She remembers being fondled and touched by her cousin inappropriately for what she estimates was for years but the extent to which the molestation went on is something which she does not remember nor does she have even a rough recollection of when it started or ended. She does not know if he raped her, or if oral sex was involved. Myra remembers how the assault affected her more than the actual act [5].

**Myra:** I was doing things like pooping in my pants and this would happen like every day. And I didn't know what to do, I didn't know whether to wash it up...so I would just bundle it up and shove it in my bag. And um...that I remember because it was so...it was almost like...like you're drowning but you can see the surface...as dramatic as that sounds... ..

basically I remember that...this is of course when...I was extremely moody, I would keep crying all the time, I would keep fighting with my parents but I was a baby so it was all stupid things, like I would start yelling at them for no reason and they couldn't figure what was happening and what was wrong.

....

Yeah...Like I remember...and I still do this...but most specifically in the 6th 7th 8th 9th like when my breasts were growing I would wear t-shirts that were four sizes too large. Like this would have been fitted for me back then (gestures to the shirt she is wearing)... I only used to wear dark colors...nothing bright, nothing pastel. Black brown grey blue...dark blue. I was convinced my foot size was a 10. I'm a 6.

...

I also remember feeling very angry and saying like how can there be a God... you now technically I was in God's room in the puja room and like right there... so.. Yeah...

Myra's memory of how her behaviour and mood was affected by the assault is clear. Later, she goes on to mention how she stopped wearing any clothes which were even remotely fitted and was comfortable in clothes at least 3 or 4 sizes larger than her. For her now, the scariest part isn't the blurry memories of the abusive acts themselves, but the blurriness of the memories. It terrifies her that she doesn't know whether or not her cousin raped her, and having these huge gaps in her memory [6].

**Myra:** I just feel like...and you know what the worst thing is... like I'm saying all this. And it almost feels like it's someone else's memories like they're not mine...sometimes I feel like I dreamt this whole thing up... like it never happened to me.. And also like it's not like I've never had contact with him ...for like ages...every Diwali I've had to stay in the same house as him and I've dealt with it and I've moved on and all of that. But you know to see him behaving with no shred of anything...like I feel like there's no guilt there's no nothing and I'm just like how is that possible. Maybe it's just me making shit up in my head maybe it never happened. And you know what's scary for me is like I don't even know...like I remember him touching me but I don't remember anything else!!! There are just these huge blanks...

For Myra, the acceptance of the reality of abuse seems to be closely tied to feelings of guilt felt by her abuser. Never having seen any guilt or even acknowledgement from her cousin, Myra wonders whether the memories of the abuse are even real. There is also an attempt to make sense of/ rationalize why he did what he did.

**Myra:** like he was a teenager... it wasn't like he was a 25- 28 year old pedo. I don't know if that's rationalizing it... In some ways he was discovering his sexuality also Myra herself says that maybe that was her attempt of rationalizing what had happened then.

### Feelings of guilt or shame

It is often that a survivor of abuse experiences emotions of guilt or shame. For ages, our society has given out the message that being abused is bad and is shameful for the family and society, so

it is something which is meant to be kept hidden and dealt with privately. Society goes so far as to often blame the survivor for the assault itself. With regard to feelings of guilt and shame, Kathryn Hall believes that gender also impacts the ways in which abuse is experienced and coped with. Masculinity, as a social construct, does not often allow for victimization following which, feelings of guilt, shame and blame are more experienced by girls rather than men who experience a rehabilitated sense of masculinity [7].

**Arun:** Even if it didn't work out, even if he did not respond to my advances I still pursued it. And in the end it did work out. And then that was the price I paid... that he entered me without my consent.

Penetration without consent is considered to be rape. However, not only does Arun not see it as rape, he sees it as a 'price he paid' for his pursuit of the man. He said that he had trusted the janitor and had wanted to explore his sexuality with him. Arun also said that he had "forbidden" anal sex because he was not comfortable, had never done it before and was not ready. But because he had been the one to pursue the janitor ruthlessly, he feels that the rape wasn't rape, just a consequence of his pursuit. The way Arun sees his abuse, as a 'price paid' places the blame squarely on his own shoulders. What Arun said seems almost as if wanting to explore his sexuality came with strings attached. And because he agreed to the exploration, he also agreed to the sex [8].

However, Hall's theory that men feel less visible guilt than girls seems to be true at least in my participants. Arun said that he was very aware of what had happened and that he had had a "one time thing" with the janitor and then proceeded to question whether or not that qualifies him for this research.

**Sunanda:** Did you have a thing with the janitor?

**Arun:** No...Not really. It wasn't a thing per say...just a one-time thing... That doesn't really fall under your dissertation does it?....

**Arun:** He was married. But the thing is...the sex...was...I was very aware of what was happening. Let me just make it very clear. I was very aware of what was happening... So that's not what comes under your dissertation topic does it?

I proceeded to explain to him that any sexual act which was uncomfortable for an individual and was done without his or her consent came under my dissertation. He agreed with me then, but the firmness of 'this was not abuse' was a theme which remained strong throughout the interview. This is in direct correlation to Hall's theory when she says that societal constructed norms of masculinity do not easily accommodate being sexually victimized thus many men will not define inappropriate sexual experiences as abusive. Though the instances of guilt are visible when Arun says he paid a price for his pursuit, it is still something which he firmly does not classify as abuse, therefore not tainting his masculinity with victimization of any kind [9].

In contrast, Myra seems to be very clear on the guilt she felt in the beginning. She now says that the thoughts of self-blame aren't ones which she feels often, however are thoughts which do occur once in a while, and though she rationally knows it wasn't her fault, the irrationality takes over and in those moments, she blames herself once more.

**Sunanda:** Did you ever have thoughts of 'did I do something to instigate it'

**Myra:** oh yeah...please. All the time... I blame myself...

**Sunanda:** what about now?

**Myra:** Obviously like I said...rationally to you can't. But irrationally, everything is your fault. Irrationally the fact that the leaves are green and not red is your fault. It's not your fault, but it's your fault. Stuff like this the feelings that you have they aren't rational. My thinking that my feet were size 10 wasn't rational and I was so convinced that I wore size 10 shoes for 3 years. It's not like I have the same feelings all the time. Right now I'm sitting here and I told you that I don't hate him. And most of the times I don't. But sometimes I can rip his head off from his body and shove it up his butt because I have that much anger. So most of the times I believe that that was someone else's whatever....and even in the tiny space where I say it's my fault I can't tell you why it's my fault.

For Myra, it seems that there are extreme reactions when it comes to guilt and blame. At one point she says that it seems that everything is her fault, but then goes on to explain that that is an irrational thought...she says that rationally she knows it isn't her fault and even when the irrational thoughts take over and she finds herself blaming herself, she knows that it isn't her fault because there is no reason. She says that the space where she blames herself is 'tiny' which may be true but the magnitude of emotion when that 'irrationality' is in control seems to be higher than the surety she feels of it not being her fault.

**Case 4:** Gemma is a 21 year old undergraduate student of psychology. She was molested by her cousins at a very young age. She was 3-4 when it started and ended when she was 11-12. She never told anyone about what was happening because initially, she did not know what it was. And then later, felt like she would be judged [10].

**Sunanda:** You said that there was a time when you blamed yourself...can you talk a little bit more about that?

**Gemma:** I lived in a conservative household...like my parents let me do stuff but I didn't have any exposure. Like I went to school and then home and then maybe some tuitions. And I was the only girl child. So I did not have anyone to talk my feelings about...and all the men around me were older than me or my molesters. Even outside the household there wasn't anyone I could talk to...it was a very protected environment where we never discussed anything so I always thought it was my own fault and the TV the shitty soaps that we see made like the ideal woman should be a virgin and I wasn't a virgin...and back then it made me feel impure I am the one to be blamed and it was because of my body that they did this. So it was very hard for me to control it...actually...I did not have the guts to go and talk to people about it because I knew they would judge me. And I was also very concerned about my family being disrupted because of me. Because if my father...which I thought. He would fight with my bua and there would be scene the blame would come to me

Here, Jackson's theory on the effect of cultural narratives on

individual and societal perception of assault is clearly visible. Gemma felt like she would never be the 'ideal woman' because of what her cousins did to her. She believed herself to be spoiled and damaged, rather than the abusers. Her influencers were the TV serials she watched which showed the ideal woman as a pure white virgin and any female who had any sort of sexuality was not only considered impure, but was also portrayed as the villain in the serials. Our own Hindu mythology says that a woman, unless pure and untouched by any but her husband, should be rejected. When Ramayana rescued Sita from Ravan, he asked Sita to walk through fire to prove that she had not been raped. Only then did he accept her back. Had she failed the fire test, she would have been discarded, whether or not the sexual act was with her consent. This is the type of ideals which our society preaches and women all over internalise, as did Gemma [11].

### Sexual relationships post abuse

According to Kathryn Hall, there are many sexual and other problems which are faced by Child Sexual Abuse survivors, which are often similar to those of Adult Sexual Abuse survivors. These problems include problems with intimacy, trust, self-esteem and communication.

Both Myra and Renuka have not been in serious physical/sexual relationships. However, both have had some physical experience more or less limited to making out and feeling bodies of the people they mad out with who generally friends or acquaintances and the encounter were occurred in parties with both women intoxicated. Both have also experimented with people of their own sex. Renuka believes herself to be completely heterosexual and even after experimenting with other women, this opinion has not changed. Myra believes she may have some bisexual tendencies but the clarity of whether or not she is a bisexual woman is something which she doesn't have yet.

Gemma, however, has had many sexual relationships post the abuse. She has confided in all her boyfriends, and non-romantic sexual partners about the abuse in order to be honest, and has received different responses. Her first consensual relationship of any kind happened approximately 6 years after the molestation ended, and when she had joined college.

**Sunanda:** Okay. So when you told one of your boyfriends after this happened, your first relationship after the molestation stopped, how old were you?

**Gemma:** I was 18.

**Sunanda:** Tell me a little bit about the relationship?

**Gemma:** It was a long distance thingy. My bf was my friends... there was a mutual friend involved so he saw my pic and you know he talked to me and we just got into a relationship and then when I told him about it he didn't really take it very seriously he didn't continue with it. He was like -that was your past so let's forget about it. He didn't engage with the topic. He kind of ran away from it.

**Sunanda:** So if you ever brought it up what was his reaction?

**Gemma:** I never really brought it up. I was like...if he wants to deal with it this way, let it be.

**Sunanda:** Did you guys ever meet each other?

**Gemma:** Yeah. We met, we were in a physical relationship. He used to come down, He was in odessa he used to work there, and he used to come down to meet me.

**Sunanda:** So how was the first time you had sex. How was that for you? Were you nervous, were you scared, any part of your past, did that come in the decision making for the first time you had sex?

**Gemma:** I really wanted to have sex because I was like if they could use my body without even my permission, why can't I use it. I want to...Now this approach, when I went to therapy, I was told that I was abusing myself. But that time it didn't feel like that. It felt like I was...I was taking agency of myself. If they could do something...I got a tattoo because of that. If they could do it...It's my body. I have don't nothing to it. If they did something I can also do something. I'll get tattoos I'll do whatever the shit I want to just because I'm a rebel.

**Sunanda:** you said that your therapist said you were abusing yourself. How?

**Gemma:** It's as if you know...I was always told that. While the molestation...Unknowingly the molesters told me that your body is good and you are good for this. So in my relationships if there was a breakup and I was emotionally attached to it, I would stop them by having sex with them. Even if they weren't into the relationship, they would have sex just because I would be ready for it. SO my therapist told me that you just don't need to rush into relationships just because you want to have sex. You want to have sex, just tell them. And I did that now. If I want to have a fling, I tell the person that I'm not looking for anything serious. Just a fling that I am looking for.

Gemma's romantic relationship seems to have a similar pattern where her boyfriends do not seem to be giving her the comfort and support she wanted. One example is given in her transcription above. However, similarly, her current boyfriend also accused her of wanting sympathy and holding on too tightly to her past. Any time she mentioned the molestation, he would ask why she let her past affect her so much and she herself began calling herself a 'bitch' for letting her past affect her present.

**Gemma:** he's like why do you let your past affect you so much. So then I also feel like sometimes I'm being a bitch to you. I don't have a better word for it. I'm being a bitch by letting my past take over me...

In stark contrast, Gemma's non-romantic sexual partners (friends with benefits) seem to have given her the support and understanding that one traditionally expects from a boyfriend.

**Sunanda:** How many sexual partners have you had?

**Gemma:** 8...

**Sunanda:** All of them were people you had an emotional relationship with or were there also some which were purely physical?

**Gemma:** No I've had flings, friends with benefits but the thing

is that they also very understood. They were very comforting. It wasn't used to just have sex. We are friends more than anything else. The benefits come later. That's the type of friends with benefits relationships I've had.

The way Gemma describes her relationships with her friends with benefits relationships is how I would describe a romantic/emotional relationship. Her boyfriend's seem to not be as emotionally invested, at least when it comes to being understanding and supportive about her past, whereas the complete opposite is true for the men she does not have a romantic connect with. It makes me wonder why she chooses the same sort of unsupportive men for boyfriends, rather than pursuing one of her friends with benefits relationships to grow it to make it romantic, or pursue a romantic relationship with a man who gives her the same support she gets from one of her friends with benefits relationship.

Gemma shows sexual problems which Kathryn Hall believes are experienced by survivors of CSA. She believes that their sexual problems do not lie with the act of having sex but with feeling sexual pleasure. Gemma has never experienced an orgasm neither with any of her sexual partners nor when she attempted masturbation. Her doctor suggested she get her vagina checked and claimed that many women do not have orgasms during their 20s. Despite knowing her history, he rejected the possibility of psychological issues causing her lack of orgasm, which supports Hall's belief that doctors are not always adequately equipped in dealing with sexual problems of abuse survivors.

Arun's first physical or emotional relationship after the assault happened two years later. But the first time he had sex, which he also considers to the time he 'lost his virginity' was three years after the abuse with someone he had fallen in love with.

**Sunanda:** How long after this incident did you start dating?

**Arun:** Dating? That was after...three years...Oh wait dating. I started dating two years after that. I met the guy I had sex with after three years.

**Sunanda:** So did you have any physical interactions with anyone before you started dating?

**Arun:** I obviously stopped for a little while because I was scared and stuff. And then I guess I started moving forward. I met this guy who I dated for a bit and I kissed him and all that jazz. I was open to the idea.

**Sunanda:** The boyfriend you have sex with for the first time... tell me a little bit about your relationship... with him were you a top or a bottom..

**Arun:** Bottom...But I did fuck him once...but he was very queasy about it...he did allow me to do it...

This relationship ended almost three years ago. Since then, Arun has not had any long-term relationships, but has had many physical one-time ones.

**Sunanda:** Have you had any sexual thing with anyone since your break up?

**Arun:** Oh yes so much. You have apps, and websites. So if you're looking for someone to have sex, you can meet someone to have sex. So in the last year I've been on many dates, I've had lots of sex, but I haven't had a long term thing with anyone.

Arun seems to be sexually open and has many one-hour-for-sex kind of dates which he says he enjoys tremendously. His words are- "I like sex so I go and get it". However, he isn't as open to romantic relationships. Hall said "During adolescence, there is often a period of increased sexual activity for boys and girls who were abused" (Hall, 2008, pg5). This is seen both in Gemma and Arun who both have had multiple sexual partners in the last 3 to 6 years.

### Perception of sexuality

How one perceives their own sexuality is a very important part of one's identity as a sexual being. Sexual fantasies, ones opinions on their fantasies, comfort with one's body, desire to have sexual experiences, etc. all constitute one's sexual identity. After experiencing abuse, it is possible that the survivor feels that their sexual identity is inextricably connected to the abuse. This is highly evident with Renuka.

**Sunanda:** So you mentioned that you think your experiences have affected your fetishes. How do you think these incidents have affected your fetishes?

**Renuka:** umm...these things because they happened to me as a child and I didn't know that they were wrong then. So I must have internalized it somehow because I never spoke of anyone about it and I was also an infantile masturbator. I think I started discovering myself when I was in 4th or 5th and I'm pretty sure that was because of the things which happened because I knew that there was something that could happen with your private parts except peeing and going to the toilet. But I have a very submissive trait when it comes to sex and...I...my fetishes are more like BDSM and submission and dominance and I feel like because I never spoke out about it, I'm okay with it which makes me feel like I am a submissive...you know...maybe I like that. But I don't know that because I've never spoken to anybody, not even my therapist. it's more like maybe I never spoke about it because I liked it and also I started masturbating quite young maybe those kind of incidents made me want to discover myself...sex because of...masturbation because of...maybe I found some pleasure in them as a child maybe. I don't know. so ...I think that is partly one of the reasons why I...like of course...you know about the stories I sent you once, the ones I've written. Those I don't consider very important because I'd written them keeping my audience in mind...who was reading them and they liked all that stuff. But personally I usually kind of in vision a relationship where...of course I am the submissive, there is some boundary of respect involved. But sexually I have no power basically. That's the kind of how I feel like might be my...like a turn on for me...but owing to the fact that I have never been involved in any kind of sexual intercourse so I don't know how it will turn out ...maybe I'm not like that at all. But all my visions. And also the kind of...in terms of sexuality...the kind of porn that gets me off, the kind of erotica which gets me off is the kind where the woman is completely powerless.

Renuka has some very definite fetishes. Not having had actual sexual experience, Renuka's belief on her sexuality is based on her fantasies and the porn she reads or watches. Looking at those, Renuka has a BDSM fetish where she is the submissive and is with a sexually dominant man. She says she doesn't want to have any power at all sexually. It is Renuka's belief that this submissive trait stems from her first experience of abuse where a man had his hands down her pants and she didn't stop him because she was 3-4 and she thought it was okay. Repeatedly Renuka mentions that according to her 'thinking it was okay', is the proof of her submissiveness as in that situation, she was completely powerless and didn't dislike it.

Most of the time Renuka talked about the different incidents of abuse, especially the first one, in which the man had his hands down her pants, she very rarely left open the possibility that she might have liked it. She mentions it once in the extract above, but other than that one incident, only uses phrases like 'thought it was okay' or 'didn't dislike it' or 'didn't see it as wrong'. It seems like, perhaps, for her, this incident is a medium or catalyst which legitimizes her sexual desires which may or may not have been the same if this incident had not occurred. It makes me wonder whether she is as comfortable with having the fetishes she has, as every time she mentioned her fetishes, she mentioned that they were so because of the internalization of the abuse she faced as a child.

Gemma freely admits to being aroused by some of the things her molesters did to her but this has just made her want to take agency of her sexual life more, to enjoy sexual acts in which she has given her consent and has some measure of control. Before Gemma's cousins began physically abusing her, they made her watch porn. Gemma openly says that after a few years, when she was a little older, she began enjoying porn and would ask her cousins for porn site recommendations. Similarly, she is also open about enjoying some aspects of what her cousins did to her.

**Gemma:** They used to cuddle with me, fondle me, and suck my boobs and all that thing. Earlier it was arousing for me. But after. When I was 12 or something we used to read it in school but in school also, in the Indian education system we aren't taught everything about it so it's like I didn't know everything about it and I still found it very arousing and stuff.

Here, Gemma says that she was aroused by the actions of her cousins from the beginning. However, later she says:

**Gemma:** I started enjoying it, it had been going on for years and years I was confused and I didn't know about it and eventually enjoyed it.

There is a slight discrepancy in what Gemma says...earlier she says she was aroused by it from the beginning, but later says that she started enjoying it because it had been going on for years and she was confused. Though she is open about the arousal she felt, perhaps she isn't as comfortable with it as she may sound at times. Saying that she 'eventually enjoyed it' because it had been going on for 'years and years' is a situation where the amount of control she has is less, which can be an uncomfortable feeling. However, being aroused by the acts of molestation from the beginning may suggest to outsiders that she didn't dislike what was happening

to her altogether and hence it would not be that traumatizing. It gives her a semblance of control within the molestation, because her pleasure was part of it as well, and it was not solely for the pleasure of the molesters. This creates confusion between the lack of control felt due to the lack of consent, and the idea of being involved and having some amount of control which may exist due to feeling arousal from the beginning of the molestation.

### Fantasies of the first time

I asked all my participants who were single what type of partners would they want to be with...I asked Renuka and Myra what type of men they would want their first sexual encounter to be with. Both women confessed to being nervous about their first time having sex...for Renuka the nervousness was mostly about the pain of penetration mixed with some body image issues. For Myra however, the issue was a little more complicated. She isn't worried about the pain of the first time having sex, but is rather confident about how enjoyable it would be.

**Sunanda:** so you've mentioned to me before a fear of people talking about you with other people after you had sex...

**Myra:** no it's not a fear...I'll tell you what it is...It's...umm...I'm friends with a lot of guys and they are my best friends and I've heard the way they talk about girls and these are guys who respect women and they have no problems talking about a girl giving this guy a blowjob and she spat on her hand and stroked his cock and I'm like its none of your business and its none of my business it's her business what she chooses to do in the bedroom because it's between her and the guy she's doing it with. And the guy doesn't have the right to tell other people about what she chooses to do or not do.

Because of this anxiety, Myra is also clear on what type of man she wants to have her first sexual encounter with.

**Sunanda:** what would be something which would make you comfortable for your first time with sex?

**Myra:** umm...either it's like a one night stand where the guy is going to another country the next day or I never have to hear from or see him again. Like Carl. I would have banged Carl or I want it to be if I'm in a relationship and I trust the guy. It won't be like a guy I picked up from Hauz Khas village and brought back to my place. Just no.

Myra knows what kind of man she wants to be sexually involved with and claims to be eager to become sexually active, however, she is also scared of rejection. When she meets a man she is attracted to, she seldom makes a move, or lets him know of her attraction. Rather, usually she befriends him and 'friend zones' him, that is, makes sure that he could never see her as anything more than a friend and hence she herself would stop seeing him as anything more than a friend. Her two most recent sexual encounters have occurred when she was highly intoxicated and these were the only encounters she has had since she was 18. Myra need a high level of control, and lack of control in her sexual encounters. She wants to have the surety of either a committed relationship or the comfort of knowing that the man she sleeps with cannot talk about her to people she knows and hence would be a relative stranger. However, even with the strangers she has met who she may be attracted to and would like to sleep with,

she tends to be more comfortable believing that they would reject her and in that surety, seldom approaches them to see if the possibility of acceptance even exists. To a large extent, these issues arise from body image issues, wherein she believes 'who could like me anyway' and that is a reason (and sometimes an excuse) to not approach the man.

There is a fear of physical intimacy which Myra feels which isn't always visible. Her first and only serious boyfriend was a purely long distance relationship where the man lived in UK and was 20 years older than her. There was almost no possibility of a physical sexual relationship happening and so it felt safe to Myra. It seems that despite presenting an image of being open and comfortable with her sexuality, Myra still struggles with the idea of actually being physically intimate.

Renuka also has a very clear image of what kind of man she would want her first sexual encounter to be with.

**Sunanda:** So you've told me before that you're very nervous about the first time you have sex and the pain which comes with hymen breaking and all of that...but outside that...so how do you see yourself mentally

**Renuka:** So I think there would be only two ways to get over with the dreaded first time. I either want leave the control in the man's hand...just do it one go. Like don't listen to what I'm saying just do it one go or...being wasted enough to not remember how it happened.

**Sunanda:** Why wasted?

**Renuka:** Because I don't think I want to remember the nervousness and fear. I don't think I do well with fear. Because it's not like I don't get scared or I avoid getting scared but when I am scared I don't trust myself with any action. So I'm not sure, I might make the wrong decision and then regret it later on.

**Sunanda:** Wrong decision like?

**Renuka:** For example the first situation where I would tell the guy to go all in one go and if I'm already scared...that I would encourage it to a point where if it hurts later on I will regret it because it would have been my decision and in that case, that would have a scarring effect.

**Sunanda:** Do you envision yourself being in a relationship or is a onetime thing?

**Renuka:** I don't think it matters as of yet. But even with a one night stand, I of course wouldn't want it to be a stranger, an acquaintance at least. If it happened in a relationship I would be a lot more scared because I would have to see that person every single day and if something goes wrong, I would probably not even bring it up again. I'll be like you know okay this thing went wrong at it was his fault but it's okay I mean he didn't know and it was my decisions because I told him to go all in or something like that. And then there may be some amount of regret towards him that I might have.

Renuka sees herself as a submissive and this trait is something which is again visible in her fantasy of what she would want her first sexual time to be like. Both Myra and Renuka's ideals for their first time are more practical than romantic, based more on their

fears and discomforts than their desires and pleasures. Renuka both accepts her submissiveness and is afraid of it to some extent. Her personality and her submissiveness combined often do not allow her to speak very openly about the grievances she may have with other people. This is something she feels may become an issue if she were to be in a romantic relationship with someone, especially in the sexual aspects of the relationship. She thinks that if something were to go wrong while having sex, she would not speak to her boyfriend about it, rather, keep it to herself and even take the burden of the blame.

However, outside of a relationship, she thinks that she would want her first time to be in a situation where she is powerless and all the control is with the guy. She says that she would want him to 'don't listen to what I'm saying' which takes away an even higher degree of control because it doesn't give her the power to change her mind and say no in the middle, since even if she does, she's already told him to ignore what she says. In such a situation, should the man listen to her and ignore her changed mind, she could feel regret and guilt as it would have been her decision to forgo all power, even that of saying stop.

### Fantasies of the romance

When it comes to what type of partner one would want to have, the qualities can differ from personality traits, physical appearance, compatibility etc. Arun explained to me that the difficulties of finding a compatible partner which has more issues than those when finding a partner in the heterosexual community.

**Sunanda:** So do you think of being in a relationship again?

**Arun:** yeah...but finding the right guy is very hard when you're gay and in India. Actually, I'll remove the 'in India' part. It's just hard if you're gay. We have a whole lot more issues.

**Sunanda:** Yeah? So what kind of issues are there?

**Arun:** Okay so imagine you get the right religion and you get the right career we have difficult sexual issues which come in as well. If he's a bottom, I can't date him because I don't want to take a bottom, I want to take a versatile because sometimes I want to be fucked, but sometimes I want to fuck too. For some guys it's okay if the guy is a bottom or a top and they're a versatile. But that's just not me.

Arun spoke of his journey as a sexual person... he started off as a bottom without any inclination to top. He then tried topping with his boyfriend whom he lost his virginity to. He tried it only a couple of times with his boyfriend and then returned to being a bottom. It is only recently that he has started liking both topping and bottoming equally and transitioned into a versatile. However, he is clear that any boyfriend he may have must have already gone through the transition and should be versatile. Arun does not want to go through the journey with a potential partner. He says he "knows what he wants and he doesn't want anything but what he wants". This shows a high level of control which Arun wants in any relationship he is a part of. For him, the fantasy of the perfect partner comes second to the physical pleasure he desires. He doesn't want to go through his transition and experimental phase where the decision to either top or bottom has to be carefully discussed and thought about, which is something which would happen if he were to date a man who was either just a Top or just

a Bottom. If something new was to be tried it would have to be discussed to make sure that the partner was ready to experiment and if he wasn't, Arun would not be able to experience both sides of sexual intercourse, something which he finds pleasurable. Because of this, Arun says he finds it easier to engage in one-time sexual encounters where he can decide who he wants to have sex with depending on whether he wants to top or bottom at that time. To me this says that perhaps he values his control more than the desire he may have for a committed relationship and his immediate pleasure is higher on his priority than a long-term relationship.

Renuka has her idea of the kind of boyfriend she would want to have relatively clear as well.

**Sunanda:** So...if you have a particular type of guy you believe you like... what is that type of guy?

**Renuka:** So one...I see a huge dichotomy in the type of guy I would like A guy who's very nice is educated sophisticated all of that but when it comes to the bedroom I think that he would definitely be more dominant, physically and maybe emotionally as well because I am a dependent type of person. There is a stark difference and that's what makes me feel like I would always have one of them missing because it's not always that a guy will have these two sides so extremely built into him so when it comes into the bedroom, I see the guy as say...of course there will be my choice so if give him my permission to do whatever he wants when it comes to sex, then I kind of see a guy who's very dominant, who's quite powerful not abusive in the sense of hitting me and all that because probably wouldn't allow that, I actually wouldn't allow that. Because I don't even allow my mother to hit me so I don't think that would be okay. But definitely a guy who would be...I think I would get persuaded by with or without consent unless it's actually abusive so... I think that. Outside the bedroom, I think I would kind of prefer an equal, respectful kind of relationship.

For Renuka, the sexual aspect is very important. Her fetishes seem to be so important to her that the respect aspect of the relationship seems to take the back seat. Though she says that she wants her boyfriend to be dominant and completely in control in the bedroom but respectful and treat her as his equal outside the bedroom, there is some hesitation which is mentioned. She says 'I probably wouldn't allow that' in terms of a boyfriend who's physically abusive and hits her. She quickly covers this up by saying that she wouldn't ever allow such a thing because she doesn't even allow her mother to hit her. However, this quick clarification seemed more as a response to the societal implications set on an abusive boyfriend.

Her prioritization is seen again when she says that her boyfriend would 'definitely' be more dominant in the bedroom, physically and emotionally, but when it comes to defining how he would be outside the bedroom, she says that she would 'kind of prefer' an equal and respectful relationship. There is a certainty when it comes to what Renuka wants sexually, but the same kind of clarity is absent when it comes to the non-sexual aspect of the relationships. It makes me wonder, if she were given the choice between having a respectful, but sexually dominant man versus who treats her inferiorly and disrespectfully but is dominant sexually, which one would be her preference.



## Various findings

A dichotomy that ran through the narratives of all the participants was their overt positioning voiced verbally while their actions displays a contrary position. Interestingly both men and women verbally took positions in the Permissive Discourse but most of their actions placed them in the Have/ Hold Discourse or the Male Sexual Drive Discourse. These were clear indicators that these youth are aware of and mostly eagerly embrace the idea of sexual feminine equality without really internalising the concept and therefore with its concomitant consequences and therefore are unable to abandon positions within the Have/ Hold Discourse without recognising where they stand.

Interestingly, I noticed theories from all the literature which were part of my research in my interviews with my participants. The influence of cultural narratives which Jackson touched upon on how a survivor feels about themselves is clear in Gemma's narrative, the direct effect of the abuse is evident in the sexual fantasies and fetishes of Renuka, intimacy issue and fear of physical connection as Hall talks of is seen in Myra's and Renuka's case, Hall's claim that men may not call their abuse as 'abuse' is seen very clearly in Arun's case. There are more instances. Hall speaks of survivors having sexual problems, but not in the act of sex, but in sexual pleasure, which is something which is clear in Gemma's case who has never had an orgasm. Sexual promiscuity is seen both in Gemma's and Arun's case.

For me, each interview and narrative was unique and had different implications when it comes to negotiating with ones' sexuality after experiencing sexual abuse. This research due to shortage of time and experience has been very limited especially in the sample size and the gender ratio. None of the conclusions formed can be generalized due to this limitation as well as the lack of diversity in class and culture within India itself as in this research, I only interviewed middle class youth in Delhi. In the future, I would want to expand on this research, increase the sample size, gender ratios, inclusion of transgender and transsexual communities, different classes, educational backgrounds etc.

Some of the interesting observations made were about elements of control within fantasises of first sexual experience, of future romantic relationships and the perception of one's own sexuality in terms of how it has been affected by the sexual assault experience of the survivors. Renuka's belief that her submission fetishes are a direct cause of an experience she had when she was 3-4 years old. Her understanding and explanation of her fetish was that because she hadn't necessarily disliked the man's hands down her pants, she liked being controlled and being powerless as she had been during that incident. Renuka is a virgin but is highly sexual when it comes to masturbation, pornography, sexual discussion and so on. Her sexual identity is closely and inextricably linked to her self-proclaimed identity as a sexual submissive.

Arun is sexually active. As he says-he likes sex and he goes out and get it. However, he did enlighten me about the sexual compatibility issues which exist in any male homosexual relationship which aren't necessarily present in heterosexual relationships. The concept of 'top', that is the one who penetrates, 'bottom', that is the one who gets penetrated and 'versatile', the

ones who likes penetrating and being penetrated. Whilst dating and forming possible relationships, sexual compatibility in this case becomes vital. Two tops or two bottoms will not find themselves sexually compatible, and hence their sexual lives may not be as satisfactory. All these aspects get added.

Overall, there were many aspects which were very evident in the interviews. I was especially interested in elements of control in fantasies and romantic relationships. The overall analysis, I believe offers a diverse view into the four participants of my study.

## Limitations

While this study has aimed to try and give a full picture of the relationship of power with experiences of sexuality, it is not without limitations. The possible limitations of this study are mentioned below and it is hoped that by making these limitations evident, further research can be undertaken in order to refine the findings.

- (a) The sample size had as of major limitations a lack of diversity most participants are college going none are represented from the school – system and of even the college going students a large number of them belong to the same university. Most of the participants were heterosexual and none belonged to the transsexual and transgender communities.
- (b) There was also a high disparity in the gender ratio between the participants which was 3:1 with only 1 male participant. This makes all questions regarding gender disparities harder to answers the sample size consists of only one male participant versus the three females which doesn't allow for conclusions to be formed with proper sample size.
- (c) In this study, the sample size was useful in gaining insight into the constructions of sexuality and relationship between power and experiences of sexuality for youth in urban middle – class India. It was furthermore a pragmatic response as not many individuals were willing to participate, especially male survivors who were much more private about their experience and hence a lot more hesitant to speak up. However, with a larger sample size, the variability within and between texts would have been even clearer, if not greater.
- (d) Further limitations of this study are seen as the gaps in knowledge and it is hoped that future research will address these gaps. Such knowledge gaps include for example limited literature based knowledge about the cultural context of sexuality in India, sex education curricula in schools in general and India in particular (of the few schools where sex education is imparted), which would prove useful in yielding a fuller picture with regard to the relationship between power in experiences of sexuality.

## Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the analysis and interpretation in the dynamics of sexuality, sexual abuse, elements of control within sexuality, feelings of guilt and shame, and the perceptions of the participants with regards to their sexuality, and the experience of abuse as they come through in the narratives of the participants. The narrations also encapsulates the findings

into a broad framework for further research into presently emerging experiences of sexuality post experience of sexual abuse as contextualized in India. The dynamics of such as it plays out through the interactions has been examined through different prisms such as perception of the sexual abuse, the feelings of guilt and shame, the sexual encounters of the participants post the abuse, and control issues faced by the participants in the fantasies they and have, the place occupied by fantasies in the private versus public sphere and the base of knowledge informing the choices made and positioning adopted by participants.

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