

Out on the



Toronto residents, from left, Devan Nambiar, Asish Purushan and Saad Talia say being gay in South Asia is more about forming deep connections than lifestyle. **Photo by Malcolm**

subcontinent

Five Toronto South Asians forged deep connections with locals in their travels on the subcontinent, where they found being gay doesn't limit you to a prescribed lifestyle or look.

By Devan Nambiar



Mathangan recalls the motorcycle ride vividly.

"Hugging him from behind," the 40-year-old remembers. "He leans back and places his elbow on my thighs. Every road bump, the embrace got tighter."

Mathangan, who like many Tamils goes by only one name, is a successful South Asian based in Toronto. He made the journey to Batticaloa, in eastern Sri Lanka, last summer.

He's also among many South Asians making a very different kind of journey — one toward a new understanding of sexual identity in the diaspora.

Many gay South Asian men who visit the Indian subcontinent find it liberating on an emotional, sexual and cultural level: it gives them a chance to connect with like-minded men from the same culture.

Or, as one man termed it, "an instant and heartfelt connection."

But some of the cultural roadblocks are daunting. To be desi and gay is to face racism and heterosexism — the belief that being heterosexual is the norm and any other sexual orientation is deviant.

There's homophobia and, perhaps just as crushing, a strong patriarchal system that sees men as unflinchingly masculine. They are the breadwinners, the dominant sexual partners, the heads of family, the procreators.

Gender, especially in desi society, is rigidly constructed. Those who stray from it are often deemed "different" and abnormal.

These are the stories of myself and four other Toronto men who recently visited the Indian subcontinent. We have all come out to our families — but not necessarily to our communities — about our gay identity.

THEY DO NOT LABEL IT

Mathangan's travels have taken him across Sri Lanka, India and Malaysia. He says he found India to be a very "homo-social" society.

"I saw gay life everywhere in my travels," he explains. "The moment they see your body language, clothes, luggage, they want to come to get

to know you. They approach you."

Being from the West often lends a visitor a kind of status that transcends the traditional social hierarchy. Western ties bring assumptions of wealth and privilege. Affluent, Western-educated people in Asia identify themselves as gay, unlike lower strata men, who do not.

"They do what they do and not label it," Mathangan says of those who can't afford to or don't wish to be identified as gay.

In South Asia, he continues, sexual orientation is "liberal in the highest and lowest classes, but is most oppressive in the middle class."

A sense of hierarchy still prevails, however, differentiating between the gay, homosexual and men who have sex with men (MSM) communities. (This last distinction refers to those who do not identify themselves as homosexual or gay.)

Due to the closeted lives of many such men, gay identity is not an option for those who live with families or in arranged marriages, upholding family obligations and honour.

As 47-year-old Saad Talia, a Canadian of Pakistani origin, describes it, "Gay is a conscious identity."

FOREIGN, BUT LOCAL

In Chennai, in southern India, men gather near the statue of Gandhi at Marina Beach. Cruising on motorbikes starts at sunset. In busy tourist areas, local boys favour sex with white men, who are seen as a rare, exciting privilege.

In a class-based society, cruising to meet men depends on what your "flavour" is.

Do you want a dhoti or jeans? For many South Asian gay men in the West, the dhoti symbolizes virility, sexiness and raunchiness.

The dhoti is also a visual cultural connection to our roots when we visit South Asia.

For the local men, if you are Internet-savvy or can read and write English, you are automatically elevated to a higher class of men, and have more options for connecting with locals and foreigners.

Siva, 35, made contacts via the Internet before

he went to Sri Lanka. He met men in various places: the southwestern beaches of Bentota and Hikkaduwa, and in areas near Colombo, such as the hotels and bars in Negombo.

When it came to approaching foreign-dressed South Asian men such as himself, local men were uninhibited, Siva found. Mathangan agrees, saying the sex was better and more satisfying physically, sexually and emotionally than in Toronto.

There were few signs of internalized homophobia or racism such as those found in Western gay culture. In the West, a gay man will sometimes have trouble expressing intimate emotions to another gay man. Or a gay man will act in a hyper-masculine way to be seen as "tough, butch, aggressive," out of fear of being identified as gay in a social setting.

As for myself, I am 47. I travelled through Karachi, a city full of sexy, delicious men with dark moustaches, swaggering hips and strides.

One evening, two men approached me on the street near my hotel. Out of the blue, one of them said, "My friend Nazim likes you." I nodded, not knowing what to think. For a week, Nazim spent his evenings with me after work.

Local men are very vocal, tactile, passionate and physical with one another.

I cannot help wondering why it can't be like this in the gay West. We have so much to learn about human interaction.

Later, when I asked Nazim why he spoke to me, he said, "You looked foreign, but local."

HEART CONNECTIONS

When Asish Purushan, 31, returned to India to visit family and friends, he found men approaching him in malls. "There is the initial eye contact, *aankhon ka ishara*," he explains.

His cousin took him to a gay party at a five-star hotel in Bangalore. It was packed with doctors, artists, airline employees and other professionals.

At Pondi Bazaar in Chennai, Purushan stopped to ask a man from Rajasthan for directions.

"Of course, honey," the man replied. The two developed a lovely friendship for the course of his visit.

"He was so passionate, romantic, we were holding hands everywhere. We even went to the temple. It is the small things that matter," says Purushan, his eyes sparkling.

Many South Asian gay men feel a cultural connection with other men of the subcontinent. The love, passion and romance that flow abundantly are a balm after the challenges of being gay in the West.

The men of the subcontinent are "more loving, passionate, less neurotic or phony, even though they are working and living in an oppressive framework," says Mathangan.

Some South Asian men in Toronto say North American gay culture is devoid of emotion and lacks true connections. The bar and party scene does not encourage authentic connections beyond the sexual, they say.

Self-perception of gay men differs greatly in North America. Issues of body image dominate. A waxed, gym-toned body is the ideal, as opposed to a more relaxed South Asian approach to body issues, where a tummy or hairy chest are welcomed.

Sex in gay South Asian cultures is not as rigid or politicized as in the West. Sex here is heavily influenced by the dominant Judaic, Christian and Islamic religions. Living in North America,

many gay men have internalized oppressive religious beliefs about homosexuality. This can precipitate guilt and self-loathing. Gay sex is seen as unnatural, and intimacy between two men creates an impenetrable wall of guilt between them.

But in South Asian cultures, gay men are influenced by monotheistic religious doctrines allowing them to be more in touch with their bodies and emotions.

For the five of us from Toronto, travelling the subcontinent validated our identities as South Asians. To be with men who understood us, spoke our language and held the same cultural values and beliefs affirmed all the colours of our lives.

Devan Nambiar works in sexual health and HIV activism and lives with his cats, Vishnu and Basil.

Bazaar takes on taboos

By Sonia M. Kandathil

When Dilshad, a 60-year-old grandmother from Pakistan, came to visit her friend's son, who owns the Fly nightclub, a table covered with vibrators and sex toys was the last thing she expected.

This exhibit was part of the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention's (ASAAP) first Sex Bazaar, held in August and hosted by Besharam, a South Asian social networking group. More than 100 people visited the table.

"Our hope is to promote healthy sexuality, awareness and pleasure," said Aalia Jadavji of the ASAAP.

While discussions of sexuality are often a closed subject in South Asian culture, visitors at the table had no problem asking questions, particularly the men, said Renee Pilgrim of the sex-toy store Good For Her, staffing the table.

Questions were varied and explicit, but never shy. "I ejaculate quickly, in three or four minutes. How do I stop that?" asked one man rather boldly. Another complained that all the toys were for women. "What about the men?" he grumbled. A third man indicated that while he was comfortable with sex toys, his girlfriends would not have been.

Most people felt the Sex Bazaar bodes well for evolving Indo-Canadian sexuality.

"We all do it, but we can't talk about it, but it's about time we did," said Erum, a woman in her 20s.



From left, Vic Johal, Umbreen Inayat and Adil Mansur of ASAAP's Sex Bazaar in August. Photo by Mike Phang

Janice and Bhavna, both 20, said South Asians are becoming more open about sex.

Things have changed, agreed Dilshad, who considers such events a good thing.

"In my generation, we were all blind and we just got married. Events like this give us more information."

The Sex Bazaar is part of a series on safe sex sponsored by ASAAP. Visit www.asaap.ca.

