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Biphobia and Bierasure: Deconstructing the Issues of Bisexual Men and Women in India

T.S. Seemanthini^{1*} and Jaiyant Cavale^{2*}

¹Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Ethicist, Attavar, Mangalore-575001, India

²Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Director, Fiendish Solutions Private Limited, No. 64, S. no. 74, C.K. Palya Road, Hommadevanahalli, Bannerghatta Road, Bangalore – 560083, India

**Corresponding author*

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A B S T R A C T

An aversion or irrational fear of bisexual people is known as biphobia, and is expressed by people of all sexual orientations. Bierasure or bisexual erasure is the deliberate invisibility of bisexual individuals perpetuated by people of all orientations. As is the case globally, bisexuals in India tend to face discrimination, stigma, and aversion from heterosexuals or homosexuals due to the inherent homophobia, internalized homophobia, as well as the dynamics of psychological and cultural construct of monogamy. In the Indian context, bisexuals are at risk of being prosecuted criminally along with other sexual minorities for expressing their sexuality. Heterosexual men and women as well as Gay and lesbian individuals often perpetuate biphobia and bierasure by describing bisexual individuals as "confused", "not loyal", "flippant", and "undecided". Review of literature indicates that bisexuals in India tend to conform to heteronormativity and enter heterosexual marriages in order to protect themselves from oppression and stigma. They may also participate in biphobia and bierasure due to internalized homophobia and to evade rejection by the society. They are at an increased risk of developing mental health issues, attempting suicide, and contracting STIs. There is need for helping bisexuals to validate their orientation, and accept their identity as valid and genuine. There is also a need to understand their issues at a deeper level, which can lead to informed psychological practice, better mental health policies, and legal advocacy. Current studies in India do not adequately present their problems, or the prevalence of bierasure and biphobia to the scientific community. Further research and exploratory studies to deconstructing their identity, social problems, biphobia and bierasure will help improving their mental health, adjustment, coping strategies in given psycho-socio-political context

Bisexuality in India

The American Psychological Association (2017) describes a bisexual individual as "*a person who experiences emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to, or engages in romantic or sexual relationships with, more than one sex or gender*". Though many bisexuals tend to conform to heteronormative definitions of cisgender expression and thus remain invisible, their sexual orientation is reason enough to create complexities.

Bisexuality has historically been associated with human beings' duality across ancient cultures, including in ancient India (Bhugra *et al.*, 2010). Even during the ancient times, bisexual individuals had to face discrimination, stigma, and aversion from a heteronormative society.

Today, bisexuals in India are at the risk of being criminally prosecuted under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, along with other sexual minorities, and face societal homophobia and internalized homophobia. Bisexuals may also face discrimination by gays and lesbians, especially in urban societies.

There are many myths, prejudices, and misconceptions regarding bisexuality in India and across the world at large. They are often assumed to be promiscuous, associated with threesomes and hypersexuality, and believed to be confused about their sexual orientation, or that they are either in transition of coming out as gay or lesbian, or that they are experimenting with homosexuality from the safe confines of heteronormativity. Bisexual men are also suspected to be carriers of STDs far more than others, while bisexual women are viewed as willing objects of sexual pleasure for heterosexual men (Rosss *et al.*, 2010).

Biphobia and bierasure

An irrational fear or aversion of bisexual individuals is known as biphobia, and people of all sexual orientations can partake in it. Biphobia may manifest in the form of biases and prejudices against bisexual individuals; perpetuating myths, assumptions, and negative stereotypes about bisexual individuals; and in the form of various kinds of violence, abuse, and discrimination against bisexual individuals. Bierasure or bisexual erasure is a deliberate attempt to deny the validity of bisexuality as a sexual orientation, and seeks to ignore, remove, or re-explain evidences and instances of bisexuality.

Bierasure is often manifested in the form of describing it as "just a phase", "experimental sex", focusing on the "sexual" in bisexual to the point of ridiculing bisexual individuals, and in expecting the bisexual individual to declare himself or herself as gay or lesbian in near future. When a bisexual individual is paired with a different-sex partner, he/she is mislabeled as heterosexual, and when paired with a person of the same gender, the bisexual individual is mislabeled as gay/lesbian. In other words, bisexuality as a valid orientation is denied or rejected in varying degrees and forms. Many organizations that claim to be LGBT-inclusive often do not have bi-specific programs and resources. Mislabeled of bisexual individuals as gay, lesbian, or heterosexual may happen even when the said individual is openly "out" as bisexual.

Research interest in biphobia and bierasure has existed since 19th century, though there is no substantial body of studies from those times (Eliason, 1997). However, there are a few instances of studies that reveal a positive attitude towards bisexual as well (Hubbard and de Visser, in press).

There is also confusion between homophobia and biphobia, and though they may be related, are distinctly different. Eliason (1997) conducted a study on 229 heterosexual undergraduate students to explore their views on bisexuality. They were asked to rate their degree of agreement to statements that consisted of stereotypes related to bisexuality. The study also explored the acceptability of bisexual, gay, and lesbian individuals among those students. The study found that there was a high degree of correlation between homophobia and biphobia, but bisexual men were viewed more negatively than gay men and lesbians, and bisexuality in general was far less acceptable among the studied heterosexuals. The study found evidence to biphobia and homophobia being related but distinct phenomena.

A study conducted by van Lisdonk and Keuzenkamp in 2016 stressed on the need for implementing bi-inclusive policies, as the authors found that the current Dutch national LGBT policies are not inclusive of bisexuality. The same study found that bisexuals scored worse than both gays/lesbians and heterosexuals in their openness about their sexual attraction, suicidality, etc. The study highlighted the oppressive and marginalizing nature of bisexuality, and how it is difficult for bisexuals to be open about their bisexuality in relationships and elsewhere. The study also pointed out that there is a need to create bi-inclusive communities and spaces, so that bisexuals can safely explore their sexuality and develop their sense of sexual self.

Mental health issues faced by bisexuals

In a study conducted by La Roi *et al.*, (2016), sexual orientation and depressive symptoms were correlated positively as early as during early childhood, and the

authors attributed the association of sexual orientation and mood disorders with minority stress mechanisms. The study revealed that lesbian and bisexual girls displayed increased symptoms of depression as early as by the age of 11. This propensity to develop and experience depression increased with time, and was related to pubertal development. Among both boys and girls, self-reported peer victimization and parental rejection faced by girls/bisexuals mediated the association between depressive symptoms and sexual orientation. Younger age was also associated with decreased social well-being among bisexuals (Kertzner, Meyer, Frost, and Stirratt, 2009).

The importance of family ties and parental support or lack thereof was described in a study conducted by Muñoz-Laboy *et al.*, (2009). In this study, Latino youth sought emotional and material support from their family members, and thus, valued the closeness by maintaining family ties. Those who desired to keep their bisexuality confidential and private from their family members experienced distress, and being open about it would invite constant surveillance by members of the family.

White Hughto *et al.*, (2015) found that existing research on bisexual girls and women is limited, and bisexuality is closely associated with adverse psychosexual health outcomes among adolescent girls. The same study found that sexual risks were most often seen among bisexual adolescent girls, putting them at risk of physical, sexual, and psychosocial stressors. The constant need to hide their sexuality, their emotional and sexual vulnerabilities, and their propensity to be discriminated made bisexuals in both India and abroad vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases/infections (STIs). Most studies point towards a high prevalence of

STIs among bisexuals (Miller *et al.*, 2005; Kumta *et al.*, 2010).

Issues faced by bisexual individuals in India

In India, bisexuals tend to conform to heteronormative practices, and enter heterosexual marriages to protect themselves from discrimination, stigma, and oppression. Many may also chose to enter heterosexual relationships due to internalized homophobia and biphobia. This participation in biphobia and biersure by bisexuals in India is mostly due to the general biphobic and homophobic culture of India, and also to evade rejection by the society.

Bisexuals in India are at an increased risk of developing mental health issues, committing or attempting suicide, and contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Johnson and Grove, 2017; Muñoz-Laboy, Severson and Bannan, 2014). Currently, there is no research in India that explores the issues faced by bisexual women. Both biphobia and biersure, and invisibility caused due to these two factors, are important causes of mental health issues among bisexuals in India. Further research is required to understand the scope and depth of psychological issues faced by the Indian bisexual community.

Role of psychologists

Most studies indicate that bisexuals across the world are at a greater risk of experiencing mental health issues like anxiety, depression, suicidal attempts, adjustment and personality disorders, substance abuse disorders, etc. due to the lack of psychosocial support available. It is also important to note that bisexuals across the world face a great level of

discrimination, self-stigma, violence, and abuse. Many bisexuals may be reluctant to discuss their orientation, let alone validate their orientation or accept their identities as valid and genuine. Thus, there is a need to approach the issue in a sensitive and patient manner, while concurrently helping bisexuals who are ready to receive support to validate their orientation, accept their identity as genuine and valid, and encouraging them to explore and accept themselves. Understanding these and other related issues at a deeper level is required for psychologists to implement informed psychological practice, devise better mental health policies, and legal advocacy.

Clinical psychologists in India face unique challenges while trying to help bisexual individuals. Firstly, it is difficult to ascertain the orientation of an individual client, unless the client feels safe enough to discuss their orientation. Secondly, clinical psychologists may have to evaluate their own biphobia and homophobia, before attempting to assist their clients. Thirdly, there is a need to consider various socio-legal aspects concerning sexual minorities, and ensuring that the safety and confidentiality of the bisexual client is ensured. It is also important for psychologists to understand the mental health implications of being bisexual, and the lack of information regarding bisexuals in India. Utmost care must be taken to understand and prevent biersure or biphobia within the clinical space, and one must also try to understand the prevalence of both biphobia and biersure in the scientific community.

Deconstructing the issues of bisexual men and women in India requires an intersectional approach and there is much to be learned from similar initiatives elsewhere in the world. Further research and exploratory studies to deconstruct the social

problems faced by bisexuals, and the various factors that maintain and perpetuate biphobia and bierasure is necessary to help tackle mental health issues faced by bisexuals. Psychologists will also need to explore coping strategies specific to the Indian cultural and social milieu, given the psycho-socio-political context.

Bisexuals across the world face unique challenges, discrimination, and stigma pertaining to their sexual orientation. In India, bisexuals are also at the risk of being criminally prosecuted along with other sexual minorities. They encounter both homophobia and biphobia, related but distinct forms of discrimination, fear, and stigma, perpetuated by people of all orientations, including bisexuals themselves, due to the process of internalizing both homophobia and biphobia.

Bisexuals are at an increased risk of developing psychological disorders, contracting sexually transmitted infections, and being victims of various kinds of violence and abuse. Bisexuals in India and across the world also face bierasure, the phenomenon in which a bisexual's orientation is not validated, and its genuineness is questioned and even erased. Most bisexuals in India conform to heteronormative norms, to evade rejection and to avoid being discriminated against. However, these and other factors lead to great psychological stress among bisexuals, and predisposes them to developing various mental health issues.

Psychologists have a responsibility to consider all these aspects of being a bisexual individual from an intersectional perspective, question their own attitudes towards bisexuality, and arrive at support strategies that help bisexual individuals to validate and accept their orientation as

genuine, while also providing intervention for any psychological difficulty they may have alongside. Most importantly, psychologists provide the kind of empathic and safe space that bisexuals find difficult to find outside the clinical milieu. Further research to evaluate the situation of bisexuals in India, and their issues requires deconstructing various factors that have led to biphobia, homophobia, and bierasure.

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