

# Doing Sex Right in Nepal: Activist Language and Sexed/Gendered Expectations

Written by Lisa Caviglia

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LISA CAVIGLIA, AUG 23 2019

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As I met S. back in 2009, he introduced himself as a confident ‘transgender’ (using the English term) committed to the cause of minorities in Nepal. Yet this identity was not promoted at all times in his everyday interactions – much dependent on the consequences such disclosure would have. For the sake of his family, he embodied the role of a male householder, accepting to marry a woman that his family would approve of. S.’s adjustments, however, were also enacted vis-à-vis the gender non-conforming community. I realised this as I was invited to a ceremony in his natal village a few kilometres outside of Kathmandu city. I was not the only guest from abroad participating in the event: a foreign volunteer, working in support of gender non-conforming activism in Nepal, had also been asked to join the celebrations. Differently from the latter, however, I knew what the festivities were for: the formalisation of the marital union between S. and a woman deemed of appropriate caste and social standing by his immediate family. S. masked this convivial event as his own birthday party in front of the other foreign guest, introducing his wife as his sister-in-law and cautioning me not to talk about the actual intentions of the occurrence. He feared not only the guest’s potential disapproval, but also the possible passing of the word to the organisation to which he was affiliated and upon which his livelihood depended at the time. I was taken a little aback by what seemed an unusual performance of ‘transgender-ness’ in front of the visitor: having known S. for a while, I was exposed to an unprecedented emphasis in his behaviour. He appeared to over-perform an identity to keep up what he felt was apt and expected of a gender non-conforming person. Specifically he emphasised through words and behaviour his belonging to a ‘transgender’ community, both local as well as transnational. Hence, in the same way in which he did not feel free to be ‘his transgender self’ within the kinship context, he appeared also curbed in front of the foreign delegate and, by extension, the gender non-conforming community, in fear they would reprehend his actions as a form of betrayal.

Nepal is one of the many sites that have been affected by a discursive ‘revolution’: this concerns the ways in which sexuality has been progressively addressed, as well as the identities thereby ensuing. In part, these were engendered and gained particular significance during the 1990s, as health development measures were introduced in the country. ‘Target groups’ were identified on the basis of sexual behaviours marked as ‘other’ within a heteronormative model (Kotiswaran 2011, 8; Caviglia 2018, 58): ‘men who have sex with men’ (MSM), transgender individuals, sex workers and more became social collectives at which preventive and curative action should be directed. These sexual nomenclatures gained global outreach and meaning, Nepal providing a particular case study of how such global dynamics play out within the interstices of local reality (Altman 2001, 86; Caviglia 2018).

Nepal’s sexual landscape has seen significant progress in terms of legal and social recognition of minorities (Boyce and Coyle 2013; Coyle and Boyce 2015). The work of activists in this realm has not only improved the lives of people non-conforming to heteronormative roles, but also their political stance as Nepal’s citizens. An exemplary ramification of this has been the legal recognition of *tesro lingi*, ‘third gender’, as a category beyond the normative binary ‘male’ and ‘female’, which encompasses a broad range of identities (Bochenek and Knight 2012, 13). In 2007 the Supreme Court ‘ruled that individuals should have their gender legally recognised based on “self-feeling” and that they should not have to limit themselves to “female” or “male”’ (Knight 2015). Legal measures have been set in place since then,

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which culminated in 2013 with the granting of legal citizenship to gender non-conforming individuals (Deutsche Welle 2015). Identity documents now mention the category “O” for “other” in passports, and *tesro lingi* in national identity cards (UNDP, Williams Institute 2014; Knight 2015; Pluciska 2015; as well as information from local informants).

Overall such developments have provided a ‘language of rights’ to which people with alternative genders and sexualities can associate and identify, and upon which they can unite as a group with needs, causes, and demands to fight for (Boyce and Coyle 2013). However, the everyday lives of gender non-conforming individuals in Nepal remain inserted into kinship mores and gendered practices that disadvantage them both materially and socially (Coyle and Boyce 2015). By non-conforming to local heteronormative expectations, they are often excluded from familial wealth and education, as well as work opportunities in the free market and other sectors. Furthermore, gender non-conforming individuals in Nepal oscillate more fluidly between gendered behaviours and sexual practices than the terminology in circulation is able to encompass.

This case study reveals a paradoxical turn of events in the lives of some gender non-conforming individuals in Nepal, especially those who have been in, or are currently involved with, activist groups in the country. It is within these communities that episodes of perceived discrimination and marginalisation have been reported. These are tied to varying understandings of ‘sexual identities’ and identification promoted by activist movements. Those not ‘complying’ with certain expectations of non-conformity, perhaps because they oscillate between familial obligations and their alternative (sexual and gendered) identities, are found to juggle uncomfortably between these two spheres, perceiving exclusion and marginalisation at both ends – within their families and immediate communities, as well as the very activist milieu in which they hoped to find solace.

This article stems from broader research on commercial sex in Kathmandu, Nepal (Caviglia, 2018). The latter ethnographic investigation approaches various actors involved in sex work, understood in the broadest sense of the term: these included street workers as well as what are locally referred to as ‘establishment-based’ sex workers, mostly operating in so called ‘dance bars’ and other venues[1]. Those identified as sex workers in these sites were mainly *cis* gendered women living up to and performing heteronormative sexualised acts – though not conforming to local standards of propriety – in exchange for retribution. Overall, the work is concerned with the deconstruction of the ‘sex worker’ category, an approach that I refrain – to some extent – here.

In this essay, I turn to transgender sex workers who were also part of the Kathmandu scene. When I refer to gender non-conforming individuals, I am talking about the experience shared by those who do not fit *cis* gendered female or male identities. Specifically, I share the experiences of respondents sexed as male at birth, but *also* desiring the performance of actions and/or appearance gendered as female by society and/or expressing sexual desires for those considered of their same birth-assigned sex.[2] The stories below point to some of the possible constrictions of the term transgender and hence I choose to use gender non-conforming throughout. The ‘transgender’ category remains nevertheless of importance, as I hope will become clear.

## Oscillating Between Conformity and Non-Conformity

The anecdote introducing this paper illustrates the need for sexual minorities in Nepal to keep appearances and respectability, lest they run the risk of social demise. Insights on homoerotic behaviour by Tamang (2003) have revealed how ‘male-to-male’ sex ‘may not be so much an expression of personal identity, but one of opportunity, accessibility and desire for semen discharge’ (Tamang 2003, 252–253). A flipside to this observation is advanced here, in that gender conformity by individuals otherwise identifying as non-conforming should not be read as indicative of a ‘lack of gender-reflective identification’ but as due to ‘the risks posed to their economic livelihoods’ (Coyle and Boyce 2015, 24). Marriage is, for many, a way of guaranteeing access to familial wealth, from which they would otherwise be excluded. In Nepal, as in many locations elsewhere, kinship and other intimate relations are fraught by material and economic transactions (Caviglia 2018). The instance presented here may be framed as a form of ‘patriarchal bargain’ à la Kandiyoti (1988), whereby actors adjust to a set of gendered expectations in order to gain the greatest possible advantage within a set of constraining conditions. In addition to this material consideration, S.’s pressure to conform taps deeper within the local kinship fabric: it is tied to moralising concepts of ‘honour’ (*ijjat*), the blemishing of which, through the non-conformity of even one member, would compromise the reputation of entire

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households (McHugh, 1998; Liechty 2003; Caviglia 2018, among others). Finally S. also longed for long-term commitment and a family. Giving in to heteronormative practices was the only way in which he felt that he could tap into such a lifestyle (Caviglia 2018).

But such strategies were perceived by some of those involved, S. included, as risky in an unexpected way. A number of the gender non-conforming men I met in Nepal in fact were placed under a lot of pressure to fulfil their marital and kinship duties. Many of them were married to women in acquiescence to their families' insistence. However much to their dismay, their choices negatively impacted their membership within the gender non-conforming community. An exemplary case in point was provided by some of the individuals affiliated with the Blue Diamond Society (BDS), an organisation that has been a central player in the context of sexual minorities' rights in Nepal. The organisation was created in 2001 'with the mission to improve the sexual health, human rights and well-being of sexual and gender minorities in Nepal including third-genders, gay men, bisexuals, lesbians, and other men who have sex with men'.<sup>[3]</sup>

Involvement with the organisation provided some gender non-conforming individuals with many benefits, but also struggles, which influenced some gender non-conforming individuals' professional lives and by implication their livelihoods:

BDS thinks that if people [within the organisation] are married [intending a heteronormative marriage], the other people in the society think negative. ... [BDS] wants to promote empowerment and encouragement ... if they [BDS] know I am married, they will be angry, because they are working for human rights, and we are not following them. They will send us away from BDS because they think we are doing a bad thing by getting married, since I am working for this community (Gender non-conforming community member, Kathmandu, March 2010).

Hence, those who chose to bend the expectations of 'non-conformity' and perform heteronormative practices also seemed to bear livelihood-related consequences. The advent of NGO and activist organisations working towards the rights and protection of gender and sexual minorities in Nepal also brought professional potential for such disenfranchised communities: many in fact were offered work within these institutions as peers, mentors, and administrative staff (Fieldwork notes; see also Coyle and Boyce 2015). These were of course very welcome opportunities in a context where gender non-conforming individuals often reported either not finding or losing work by virtue of discriminating attitudes (Oli and Onta 2012; Singh et al. 2012; Wilson et al. 2011; Coyle and Boyce 2015). At the time of BDS's establishment, some of my informants reported they were encouraged to 'come out' by the organisation members and offered attractive work. But for some this security appeared to crumble in the face of what was perceived as gender conforming behaviour, expressed through their participation in heteronormative marital arrangements:

They (NGO staff members) told me that I do not belong to the community and I should therefore leave the office/NGO ... but where should I go? If you had not asked me to come here, I would have been happy to work in my previous job. Since I've joined (the NGO), I have been exposed and my reputation is ruined. Everyone now knows me as "lady boy" in my neighbourhood. So in this situation, where can I go? ... Where could I go and work now?, I told them (Gender non-conforming community member, Kathmandu, September 2015).

On paper however the organisation appears to acknowledge the pressures of 'compulsory heterosexuality' these individuals are placed under, reflecting their attempts to attune international standards to local realities (BDS 2003, 13; Tamang 2003, 229).

Not all married gender non-conforming individuals, whether identifying as 'transgender' or as other 'local' gender identities, as further outlined below, shared the experiences mentioned above. Many had been married long before BDS came into existence and reported no form of discrimination against them because of this. Furthermore, timing may have played a possible role: at a historical moment – as mentioned – when legal reforms were being advanced, drafted, and fought for, it may have been perceived as more paramount to stick to clear definitions and expected behaviours. Ambiguity and fluidity may have been seen as counterproductive during these very delicate times. This however can only remain at the level of conjecture.

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There also appears to be an issue of conflation, whereby *tesro lingi* (third gender) becomes synonymous with 'transgender' (UNDP, Williams Institute 2014, 8). The latter appears to be understood according to the definition given in Pant (2005) as 'individuals whose gender expression and/or gender identity differ from conventional expectations based on the physical sex they were born into' (Pant 2005, 7; Bochenek and Knight 2012, 20). BDS itself (2014), quoting Kapur (2012), acknowledges how 'the third space may become the space for fomenting a queer politics that does not become just another letter at the end of the LGBT acronym' (Kapur 2012, 58; UNDP, Williams Institute 2014, 7). Yet, accounts concerning tensions within the community, as outlined above, point to how BDS – or at least some of its members – may *de facto* appear to ignore the fact that in Nepal 'sexual and gender minorities ... do not necessarily present as such in all settings' (UNDP, Williams Institute 2014, 7).

In such a climate, the 'language of rights' that allowed communities to rise against discrimination may have assumed a paradoxical effect, whereby expectations concerning the 'right' behaviour and life to have as gender non-conforming, generated friction within the community. Gender non-conforming individuals found to conform to the local heteronormative model experienced discrimination within the very community that had previously welcomed them, falling between the 'cracks' of categorical definitions. These individuals manage uneasily a life between two worlds. They do so in the attempt to ameliorate life conditions as well as gain acceptance. In the process however they feel stranded in a limbo where they lack full membership to either community.

## A Language for Activism and Self-Definition

Boyce and Coyle have referred to advocacy work in Nepal in the context of sexual determination as a 'networked process' in that it was 'informed by international flows of ideas concerning sexual and gender minority rights' and the language related to it (2013, 15–16). A short documentary about the life of BDS's founder and leader, Sunil Babu Pant, reveals the genesis of his awareness of his 'identity' as an expression of the above-mentioned dynamics:

When I went to Japan ... homosexuals were accepted there. But when I arrived to Nepal, nobody talked about homosexuals here. ... I was able to meet many homosexuals and third genders ... I began to *tell* them about sexuality and gender.[4]

During a talk in Spring 2010, Sunil Babu Pant cited the many challenges and dangers affecting gender non-conforming individuals in the country. The identities engendered by the processes discussed above allowed activist movements to coalesce, whilst providing a 'language of rights' through which marginalised communities could find support and protection, as well as legitimate expression.

Before BDS our life was terrible, after BDS our life is good because we know our sexuality and our rights. Before BDS we did not know so we felt sad (Gender non-conforming individual, Kathmandu, March 2010).

These individuals found strength, a sense of self, and justice within the identity politics framed by the international language in which they have been placed. The potential to enjoy the same citizenship rights as everyone else turned such sexual and gender identities into tools to be used for the achievement of better lives. The denominations formulated in this context also provided a sort of cleansing terminology *vis-à-vis* local – and at times perceived as derogatory – terms, often used as a way to insult and ostracise those non-conforming to the perceived norm. The same informant mentioned above recounts the embarrassment of being referred to by his neighbours and immediate community as *hijra*. According to Pant (2005, 7; Bochenek and Knight 2012, 20), *hijras* 'are the most visible gender minority in South Asia'. While many 'are born biologically male and wish to be female' and subsequently 'undergo castration', some 'are born inter-sexed' (Pant 2005, 7). They often accompany religious festivities viewed as auspicious figures in what, paradoxically, consists in very heteronormative occurrences: marriage and birth of a son (Lal 1999). As noted by Boyce and Coyle, *hijras* are generally perceived in Nepal as an 'Indian phenomenon' (2013, 20), with many of those being found within Nepal's confines located in the Terai, the southern plains bordering India (Pant 2005). Due to the tense relations between the two countries, the term can debatably be considered another of the perceived 'polluting' influences derived from the powerful southern neighbour (Shresthova 2010).

S. often discussed the term 'transgender' as being a more suitable denomination, tuned into transnational networks

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of power that granted some degree of legitimacy within an otherwise hostile context. Yet he also hailed the Nepali *tesro linghi* or *meti*, discussed further below, while also expressing through practice various behaviours and identities that cannot be easily sorted into one sole category – even more so if somewhat ascribed from elsewhere. These inconsistencies are apparent, in that they reveal how the application of discrete identities does not play out smoothly in everyday life. Fluidity rather than division provides a more accurate vision of Nepal's reality. The local *tesro lingi*, understood as Kapur's 'third space' (2012, 58), may indeed express such pliability in the performance of gender and sexuality in Nepal.

## Between the Lines of Language, Everyday Lives and Classifications

Efforts to prevent 'the pitfalls of cultural essentialism' were present throughout sexual minority activist attempts in Nepal, whereby the terminology employed resulted from an interpellation of interested local community members, health professionals, and advocates (Boyce and Coyle 2013, 16). Despite this, a certain degree of reification could not be avoided, resulting in instances of discord between terminology and related expectations of 'the ways sexualities are lived, felt, discussed, or ... not discussed' in the Himalayan state (Boyce and Coyle 2013, 16).

The case study I present here builds upon this critique, unveiling friction within the activist community. Much as noted by Knight and colleagues, the individuals I refer to reveal how 'Nepal's contemporary third gender category is heterogeneous' (Knight et al. 2015, 103). Their study looks at the deliberations among activists and community members as they worked to decide who to include under such a denomination, a discussion that remains still open today. The cases and utterances presented in the previous sections are exemplary in this respect. While some of the informants stood for a multiplicity of identities, whereby individuals oscillated between gendered roles and sexual preferences, others attempted to pose clear boundaries upon the 'third gender' category. Specifically a certain 'presentation and appearance' relative to the international denomination 'transgender' was preferred when assigning membership to the group, and those not living up to expectations appear to have been excluded.

In the Nepalese case presented here, favouring English terms in the context of sexual discussion seemed to 'serve a social function' (Pigg 2001, 531): it cleared informants of the stigma that 'dirty' local terms were perceived to have cast upon them. Referred to as 'code switching' by Pigg (2001, 532; Caviglia 2018, 138), the use of English allows one to 'defuse the emotional charge of certain words in one's mother tongue' (2001, 512). In doing so, deliberations are 'sanitised' while concomitantly allowing for broader possibilities for exchange (Pigg 2001, 516). Yet while these adjustments indeed have positive turnouts for those hailing them, they also seem to limit. For the gender non-conforming, for instance, conflating the local *tesro lingi*, third gender, with the narrower global 'transgender', has repercussions for how people are 'allowed' to live out this identity, as the cases discussed above reveal.

Local terms, such as *meti*, appear to be more broadly encompassing, allowing for more fluid movement between various gendered and sexual practices. Finding origin in the Eastern Himalayan regions of India, *meti* has been postulated to arise 'from the phrase "to quench one's thirst", with the connotation that the role of the *meti* is to satiate men's (sexual) desires' (Tamang 2003, 240; Knight et al. 2015, 104). While *metis* is the term most commonly used 'in Nepal's hills areas', other terms, such as '*singarus*' and '*kothis*' are used 'in the western hills' and 'in the Terai areas' respectively (Pant 2005, 7; Bochenek and Knight 2012, 20). According to Pant (2005, 7) *metis* 'feminise their behaviours' in order 'to attract "manly" male sexual partners and/or as part of their own gender construction, and usually in specific situations and contexts'. While some may cross-dress, such practice is not typical for all.

Furthermore, much like some of the cases discussed above, *meti* identity, for those who ascribe to it, is not lived out by all at all times. This is often due to fear of discrimination, a need to respond to kinship pressures but also to assure and tap into their sole possibility of gaining familial affection and hereditary rights (Pant 2005 and field note observations). *Metis* are often opposed to *Tas*, who are defined as 'homosexual men and women' that 'act no differently to heterosexual people except as regards their sex lives' (Pant 2005, 7). While they perceive themselves as, and act as, heterosexual individuals, they take *metis* as their sexual partners. Fluidity is very much in practice in Nepal but some of today's linguistic and other arrangements appear to encourage constriction.

All in all, questioning membership by virtue of a lack of suitable 'non-conforming' practices and heteronormative

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roles, led some among the gender minorities in Nepal to perceive other forms of stigmatisation, such as the loss of the 'right' to identity as well as, at times, of the material means of subsistence. It is at this juncture that we could see the cases presented here as an instance answering Pigg's question: 'What comes to count as a translation of a concept, and at what points does translation fail?' (2001, 482). This could be one of those times, in that certain renditions may lead to forms of exclusion, by drawing strict boundaries around identities that are otherwise more fluidly practised. Associating *tesro lingi* with 'transgender' may lead to a reduction of 'social spaces that might allow for the expression of same-sex desire while performing heteronormative gender roles ... in Nepal' (Coyle and Boyce 2015, 15). This may not only be due to the 'growing awareness surrounding different sexual and gender subjectivities' (Coyle and Boyce 2015, 15), introduced by advocacy work tuned into 'transnational networks' and a global 'language of rights'. Rather, it is also by virtue of the expectations of advocates that those identifying and using such language to define themselves conform to the 'non-conformity' that they associate with. Those assuming a role within both worlds, on the other hand, appear to experience a double form of ostracism in which they are coerced to oscillate between and live awkwardly within one side and the other.

## Conclusion

The cases and observations presented throughout this article highlight how gender-variant understandings of self are not always reducible to culturally explicit and socially evident claims to identities, or fixed across entire lifespans (Boyce and Pant 2001; Boyce and Coyle 2013; Coyle and Boyce 2015, 10). Categorical distinctions not only exclude the possibility of moving fluidly between gendered identities and/or related sexual behaviours and social rites and practices, but also impact materially the lives of those who do not conform to the expectations and compulsory non-conformity thus reified. Subsuming local terms to transnational nominal categories may not only be a process of cultural homogenisation. It may also be intertwined with how funding is allocated in the context of global sexual minority rights. As the case studies here discussed reveal, such 'misunderstandings' therefore affect individuals socially but also materially.

## Notes

[1] Fieldwork for this project took place over a period of approximately 10 months between 2009 and 2010 (funded by the German Research Foundation, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, within the Cluster of Excellence 270 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context' at Heidelberg University). Some of the interviews included in this article were undertaken during month-long visits in 2015 and 2016, in the context of a research project investigating labour migration in the sex entertainment and domestic sector (funded by the Gender Equality Section of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin).

[2] See Knight et al. (2015) for more details on the various sexual/gendered identities in Nepal, the complexity of their expression and the multiple attachments a single individual may demonstrate with several categorical definitions.

[3] <http://www.bds.org.np/about-us/>

[4] Quotes reported from the documentary "Journey of Decade" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jq3HZ4Dr4Y>).

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**Lisa Caviglia** (BSc Medical Biochemistry; MSc International Health; PhD Anthropology) researches gender and sexuality, and transnational migration between Asia and Europe. These topics have been addressed in recent media and scholarly publications, including "Sex Work in Nepal: the Making and Unmaking of Category" (Routledge, 2018) and "Outsourcing Love" (Economic and Political Weekly, 2017). She is currently focusing on "Traditions of Yoga and Meditation" at the School of Oriental and African Studies (London, UK).