All the Lonely People

November 1, 1999 By Ashok Row Kavi

The ringing telephone shatters the cool August quiet. It has rained through the night, and the ground outside is a silver mirror of water reflecting the dark clouds sailing in from the Arabian Sea. I pick up the receiver and look at my watch as an anxious voice says, “I just want to know if it’s dangerous to suck a syphilitic cock.” It’s 6 am.

“You may have less of a chance of getting HIV than in anal sex,” I say reflexively, “but you may end up with oral infections.” This is how my days have started since June, when the Humsafar Trust opened its HIV testing center in Bombay. It’s Asia’s first-ever city government drop-in site for men who have sex with men (MSMs).

I call our administrator, Jehangir Jani, and his assistant, Jasmir Thakur, informing them of the caller. I then check the morning papers. They scream about the “spread of the deadly virus AIDS” to “innocent housewives” and “our vulnerable army boys.” Gays, prostitutes and *hijras* (ritually castrated men who dress and live as women) are apparently expendable.

At 11 am, our intern, Rakesh, opens the center. Housed in a bazaar, it consists of a terribly congested office, a counseling room with a pair of worn sofas, a coffee lounge and our new STD clinic. The place smells of stale spices, dried fish and the sweat of the bazaar’s hardworking men. The center is abuzz all day. Our counselor, Rajiv Dua, takes a half hour with each drop-in; virtually every MSM he sees has a wife Rajiv doesn’t see.

Later we prepare to open the clinic. Packets of latex gloves, disposable syringes and proctoscopes are laid out for Dr. Maneesh and Dr. Sameer, the young residents who come in at 4:30 and sit down for their cuppa chai.

By 5, as white-collared men crowd the lounge with the *hijras,* I finally feel the strain. I’d like a quick catnap in the library, but our field workers are there with questionnaires designed to test three indicators: the prevalence of high-risk sex in homosexual encounters in the city, the quantum of multipartner sex and the use of condoms. A survey by *Bombay Dost,* our sister gay magazine, shows horrendous rates of unprotected sex. Guys are using coconut oil as lubricant, for heaven’s sake!

The doctors ask me to sit in on the case of a young man who insists he has never had sex. “Ask him how he has lesions in his anal region,” says Maneesh. "But that’s just *masti* [mischief],“ the puzzled teen says. ”Me and my friends were just fooling around. That’s not sex with a girl.“ As I

explain sex to him in my standard eight-minute lecture, I see the horror on his lovely face. I pat him on the back and ask the doctors to call him for post-test counseling. ”He can’t not be positive," their look says.

In the lounge an older main waits, looking confused. The staff tries to make him comfortable. “I wish there was something like this 20 years ago,” he says, touching my arm as if trying to pass on a secret message. I go to hug him, but he’s too wary, so we do a *namaskar,* folding our hands in front of us.

It’s nearly 8 pm, and Jasmir is counting the remaining condoms. We also keep track of the pamphlets; each is precious, since all printed paper is taxed as a “luxury item” in India.

The older man is looking at a safe-sex poster I got in New York City, one showing two men holding each other. I touch his shoulder; he turns--there are tears in his eyes. As the staff does a last once-over to see that everything is locked up, he takes a small step closer to me.

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