

Ketki Ranade

# Growing Up Gay in Urban India

A Critical Psychosocial Perspective

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# Preface

This book describes experiences of growing up gay/lesbian in the cities of Bombay<sup>1</sup> and Pune in India, in the late 1980s and 1990s. This is a retrospective study, wherein participants in their mid-thirties are describing their childhoods, adolescence, youth and growing-up years. So while I present this book to readers today, in times that are characterized by a lot of visibility to LGBTQ issues, it talks of a time defined by invisibility and silence and the resulting isolation of persons with same-sex sexuality. Readers may note that things have changed and yet have not. There are many more cities and small towns in the country today that are holding their very first LGBTQ Pride Marches, for instance; and yet the distress of a child who has to wear a particular type of school uniform based on the gender assigned to them at birth, remains the same and so does the police harassment of a *hijra*,<sup>2</sup> or familial violence faced by a lesbian woman. In fact, one could argue that today, much more than ever before, we are living in times of *intolerance of difference* and hate. There is much more surveillance on how we live, what we eat, what we read, and who we love and live with.

This book is a result of my decade-long engagement through research, therapeutic practice and activism in the broad area of LGBTQ rights; and more specifically with the question of the ways in which *difference* from naturalized heterosexuality affects individual life experiences across the life span. I explore experiences of growing up gay from two primary locations—as a mental health professional/activist and as a queer feminist activist. As a mental health professional/activist, I have witnessed the medicalization and pathologization of non-normative sexualities and gender expressions within psychological and

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<sup>1</sup>In the 1980s and most part of the 1990s, Mumbai was still called Bombay. It was in 1995, after the Shiv Sena (a regional political party) formed a coalition government in the State of Maharashtra, that Bombay was renamed Mumbai after the Hindu goddess Mumbadevi. For several years thereafter and even now, people continue to use Bombay and Mumbai interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup>A transfeminine person, who is part of a close-knit community with distinct socio-cultural, religious practices that has traditionally been home to people of non-normative gender expressions in the Indian sub-continent.

psychiatric literature and practice. While there is increasing emphasis on gay affirmative literature, there still exist large gaps in understanding the lived experience of persons who transgress norms of gender and sexuality, and whatever is available as literature on affirmative practice is far from being mainstreamed or incorporated in the education and training of mental health professionals. As a queer feminist activist, I am witness to, and participate in, conversations around strategy-building and campaigns for assertion of queer rights; these assertions primarily represent adult queer persons. However, here too, non-heteronormative childhood/adolescence and its struggles with institutional forms of heteronormativity seem absent. This book is an attempt to give voice to the silences that I have encountered within the mental health literature as well as queer literature in India.

With respect to the representation of gay and lesbian lives in research and academic literature in India, I suggest that there is a near-absence of language, image, and discourse around childhoods that do not conform to the gender binary or the idea of naturalized heterosexuality; and yet there is a simultaneous public health discourse of ‘risk and vulnerability’ to HIV and other sexually transmitted illnesses that are linked, in the popular imagination, to gay and bisexual men, men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women. Reports of lesbian suicides, depression, suicides/self-harm among transgender persons, and substance abuse among LGBTQ youth, are a few other mental health concerns that are documented in literature in India. Thus, from no representation within certain discourses such as child rights/child welfare schemes of the state, and a proportionately higher representation within health/mental health literature as pathological-vulnerable-victim, to popular imagery of resilience and pride within LGBTQ campaigns, I suggest in this book that the lived realities of young gay and lesbian individuals are likely to be somewhere in between: in the experience of living, negotiating, passing, and asserting.

Using a life course and a critical psychosocial perspective to understand experiences of growing up gay has enabled me to: (a) understand the internal/psychic world of a gay/lesbian child and young person, while being attentive to ways in which childhoods and growing up years are constructed through naturalized heterosexuality and therefore the negotiations that the gay child has to undertake to navigate their way through the growing-up years; and (b) study growing up gay in the context of a historical time and space. For instance, what was it like growing up in 1990s Bombay/Pune? How visible were LGBTQ lives then? A critical approach in this book also means asking questions of representation of LGBTQ lives in disciplines and fields of enquiry—such as childhood studies, developmental psychology/life span studies, family studies—in India and uncovering heteronormative biases in their conceptions of childhoods, adolescence, and families.

In the writing of this book, particularly Chaps. 3–6, I have retained several first person narrative accounts of the study participants; in fact, narratives appear in two forms in this book. One form of the narratives is as prelude to each of the chapters from three to six. These narratives, while written in the form of a first-person account, are not gathered from one particular study participant. They are at times reflective of common/ shared experiences of study participants; at times they reflect

things shared in conversations among friends, or at a meeting of our collective; and, at times, they are based on my own personal/ life experiences. The second form of narratives presented through chapters Three, Four, Five and Six are excerpts from interviews with individual participants.

I hope that the insights from this book would serve as a mirror to young queer persons and help them and their loved ones make better sense of the struggles and joys of growing up gay. These may also be useful for students and practitioners of mental health sciences, childhood studies, teachers and mentors to young people, to develop more empathy for diverse experiences and provide better support, services, and solidarity for all.

Mumbai, India  
December 2017

Ketki Ranade

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This book has been an exercise of *finding a voice*, a first person voice of experience—of myself and those of my participants. I am immensely grateful to all my study participants for lending their voices to this endeavor, and for sharing some of the most intimate, as well as mundane, aspects of their lives and growing-up years with me.

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## About the Author

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# Abbreviations

ABVA	AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
APA	American Psychiatric Association
APsya	American Psychological Association
CSA	Child Sexual Abuse
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
IJP	Indian Journal of Psychiatry
IPC	Indian Penal Code
LBT	Lesbian, bisexual women and trans persons
LG	Lesbian and Gay
LGB	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
MHPs	Mental Health Professionals
MSJE	Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment
MSM	Men who have sex with Men
NACO	National AIDS Control Organization
NALSA	National Legal Services Authority
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission
PAGFB	Person Assigned Gender Female at Birth
PUCL	People's Union for Civil Liberties
TG	Transgender
WHO	World Health Organization

# Chapter 1

## Growing Up Gay: Interrogating Disciplinary Frames



This book explores experiences of growing up—through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood—of lesbian and gay individuals within their homes, schools, neighbourhoods, and among friends; their journeys of finding themselves and their communities while living in a heterosexually constructed society. It offers a glimpse into the lives of young children who often grow up feeling ‘different’ from their siblings, peers, and friends, and with constant messages about correct ways of being from parents, teachers, friends and counsellors/doctors. It describes unique challenges to growing up gay, alongside the complex processes involved in the decision of ‘coming out’. These are with reference to the specific socio-cultural-relational contexts of the participants. The book further discusses the experience of meeting others like oneself, forming intimate, romantic relationships, bonds of friendship, finding political solidarity, constructing families of choice, and locating the meanings of these in one’s own identity-development processes.

The book is based on an exploratory, qualitative study with young gay and lesbian persons in two cities of India, Bombay and Pune, and employs a life course perspective to explore the growing-up journeys of these young persons. The book includes layered narratives of the study participants along with an analysis of these growing-up experiences from a critical psychosocial perspective that is attentive to the subjectivities and the individual processes of making sense of an emerging non-normative sexuality within a socio-cultural-political context of homonegativity and gender binarism.

## 1.1 Looking for the Gay Subject in Childhood/s and ‘Growing-Up’ Literature

In attempting to understand ‘growing-up’ experiences of gay<sup>1</sup> individuals in urban India, I would like to begin by contextualizing this work within the broad literature on human growth and development, growing-up and childhood studies. Existing work on the lives of persons with non-normative sexualities, specifically gay men and lesbian women in India, is focused on adults and their rights and concerns. Most of this work does not reflect on the growing-up years of gay and lesbian persons as a subject of study (though descriptions of the growing-up years do form a part of first person narratives and anthologies of gay persons). In this chapter, I primarily suggest that sexuality and its emergence are not a one-time phenomenon of adult or even adolescent life, but instead a process. While this process has been studied in-depth and commented upon by several scholars of life span studies, often this commentary is about the development of normative sexuality. With this narrative being the dominant one, it gets naturalized and universalized, in turn invisibilizing the growing-up stories of individuals with non-normative sexualities. While I am aware that sexual non-normativity itself is a diverse phenomenon, in this book, I will focus only on growing-up experiences of young gay and lesbian individuals.

### *Perspectives on Growing-Up and Childhood Studies*

Childhood studies is one possible place to begin the exploration of research and literature on ‘growing-up’ years. Despite being an interdisciplinary field, childhood studies has been traditionally dominated by the discipline of developmental psychology and its theories of child development.

Developmental psychology is a branch of psychology that is concerned with studying childhood development and focusing on human growth across the lifespan. Developmental psychology divides the human life span into a series of age-graded segments, each segment characterized by physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Most texts of developmental psychology follow a chronological format from birth—or even inception—to death, with specified age limits for each period/stage, and certain milestones to be achieved in each of these stages. The origins of this discipline, in the post-war years, reveal that developmental psychology has primarily been concerned with the establishment of norms

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<sup>1</sup>I use the term ‘gay’ in this book mostly to mean both men and women with same-sex sexual attraction, identity, and orientation. Thus, in most instances in the book, the term ‘gay’ is used to refer to both gay men and lesbian women, except in instances where I use the term ‘gay men’ specifically to refer to men. For further discussion on identities and terminology, please refer to Sect. 1.4 of this chapter: ‘Gay’, ‘Lesbian’, ‘Queer’—contextualizing sexual identity labels.

of growth and development. It has done so through developing technologies of measurement of mental/psychological/cognitive abilities and has, thus, produced a classification of age-related abilities. Over the years, developmental psychology has produced life stages such as 'childhood' (which may be further divided into study of 'early' and 'late childhood' or 'infancy', with 'toddlerhood' predating 'childhood'), 'adolescence', 'adulthood' and so on, with a series of developmental tasks prescribed for each of these stages. It is primarily concerned with the statistical development of norms for each life stage and prescribing the same for the life span.

A critique of developmental psychology has arisen within childhood studies, and some of the main critical positions are concerned with the universality assumed by developmental psychology in understanding human growth and development, as well as the linearity accorded to these experiences. In addition, developmental psychology is seen as playing a role of regulation and legislation of what is 'normal'; departure from or delays to which, would be seen as pathological, and requiring intervention. Children and mothers have been traditionally the primary unit of inquiry in this branch of psychology, and examples of the regulation mentioned above would be related to norms of adequate mothering and nurturance, with implications for mothers in terms of amount of time spent with children, taking up paid work outside of home, day care for children, and what Burman (2007) refers to as responsibility for the 'moral performance of the next generation' (79). By introducing ideas of physical and psychological maturation, and by claiming universality of development experiences across the life span, developmental psychology has 'naturalized' human development and, by extension, anything which falls outside the standardized norm is deemed 'unnatural'. Cultural and contextual influences, including cultural and class variations in life expectancy, different perspectives on childhood, ageing, variations in family structures, and child rearing practices, are often ignored or treated as peripheral issues within this discipline (Burman 2007).

In addition to developmental psychology, one of the well-known contexts in which sociology has traditionally engaged with the study of childhood is that of socialization theory. Parsons and Bales (1956) describe the child as a being that needs to be moulded in order to be able to participate in society. This moulding/socialization of the child occurs in three stages. The first stage is referred to as 'primary socialization', where the child's personality is shaped by the family, and the values and attitudes that are imparted by parents to the children. The second stage is that of 'secondary socialization'. In this stage, the individual, usually a teenager or young adult, begins to become aware of societal expectations and what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The third or the 'tertiary' stage is when the individual as an adult is integrated into the larger society. Parsons states that the socialization of children and stabilization of adult personalities is the main function of the modern family. It is the family that serves as the primary link for the child to the external world. Apart from the family, there are other, secondary, agents of socialization such as the school, the neighbourhood, and peers that play a significant role in shaping childhood and adolescence.

A critical stance towards the traditional frameworks used to study childhood/s, within child development, developmental psychology, sociology, family studies, has emerged since the 1980s and '90s, under the broad head of a 'new' sociology of childhood (Tisdall and Punch 2012). The Piagetian idea of child development, with its fixation on universal, standardized and inevitable developmental stages, justifying adult supremacy (James et al. 1998, 18), and Parson's notion of adults as mature, rational and competent, whereas children viewed as "less than fully human, unfinished or incomplete" (Jenks 1996, 10), have been severely critiqued by these approaches. In fact, the idea of childhood, viewed in relation to the category 'adult', wherein childhood is seen as a temporary phase that will eventually end in adulthood, is fundamentally critiqued by thinkers within the sociology of childhood. Qvortrup (1994) explains this by describing the social construct of 'human becomings' rather than 'human beings' used in relation to children, which would explain the sparse attention given to studies of childhood within mainstream sociological research. One more conceptualization of childhood in this context is to think of children as dependants and needing protection; this views children as deserving of additional rights and protection and, at the same time also places restrictions on the enjoyment of certain rights and expects the exercise of certain obligations (Boyden and Hudson 1985). It is some of these conceptions of childhood/s, promoted within the traditional academic disciplines as well as in public opinion, that makes the 'rethinking of childhood/s' a difficult proposition. Mayall (2000) suggests that a major barrier in rethinking childhood/s, is the 'pleasing and reassuring' image of childhood that western psychology proposes. It is a conception of childhood as being innocent/uncorrupted by the realities of adult living and politics. Mayall states, 'Just as women have been assigned to the private and the domestic, we are taught to think of children as growing up there too, in a happy domain which enables them to develop, unmolested by the stresses of public life' (Mayall 2000, 246). In addition to the idea of being innocent and pure, there is also the conception of children as being unstable, unreliable, and incompetent; not having yet achieved 'adult maturity'. This image of the child as immature, incompetent, dependent and passive is common in Western as well as Indian notions of childhood (Bisht 2008). Thus, one of the challenges in rethinking our notions of childhood/s is the adult dilemma of choosing between the autonomy, or agency, of the child, and protectionism that predominates the adult conception of childhood/s.

Yet another dimension to be considered in the discussion on the conception of childhood/s in various disciplines is that the child is thought of as an individual, as a member of a family, rather than as part of a social group. Thus the development of the child is thought of as an individual/intra psychic or interpersonal (dyadic, often referring to the mother-child dyad) process alone, unconnected to the social structure. Mayall (2000) refers to this as the individualization and familialization of childhood. Familism, Chaudhary (2004) argues, is a significant reality of Indian families, wherein the child is presumed to 'belong to' the parents and is assumed to be mirroring the parental social identities. Then there is also the scholarization of childhood, where the assumption is that the proper activity or rather 'duty' of every child is to be a pupil and being engaged in any other activity, especially paid labour

is unacceptable. Qvortrup (in Corsaro 2005) suggests that childhood can be thought of as a structural form, moving beyond individualistic, adult oriented, time bound perspectives. Qvortrup asserts that childhood may be a temporary period for children, but is a permanent structural category in society. Childhood is exposed to the same societal forces as adulthood and children are to be viewed as social agents, who contribute to the reproduction of childhood and society, through negotiations with adults and the creative production of cultures.

Tisdall and Punch (2012) state that newer approaches to childhood studies, that have been critical of the traditional models of child development, have set up a counter-paradigm in childhood studies; these include a few principles or what the authors refer to as 'mantras' in childhood studies: "childhood being socially constructed, recognition and focusing on children and young people's agency, and the valuing of children and young people's voices, experiences and/or participation" (Tisdall and Punch 2012, 8). This implies that childhood/s is/are to be viewed, not as a universalist category, but as being constructed socially and, therefore, as being variant and diverse. The focus thus has to move away from studying of norms and instead shift to change, transitions, relationships, contexts, and cultural variations that are neither stable nor static. It is then necessary to be cautious about notions such as the 'global child', in favour of a 'childhood in context'.

Children's participation and agency is another construct that has been focussed on within childhood studies. The traditional view of children as passive recipients and dependants, such as in the process of socialization, is questioned here. "Socialization is not seen as merely involving adaptation and internalization, but is viewed as a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction" (Corsaro 2011, 20); as a collective and communal activity wherein children negotiate, share, and create cultures with adults and each other. This process has been termed by Corsaro (2005) as Interpretive Reproduction. Symbolic cultures in children's lives, such as children's media (cartoon, films), children's literature (fairy tales), mythical figures and legends (Santa Claus, The Tooth Fairy), are examples of how children engage with adults in co-creating culture.

Linked with the idea of children's participation is the notion of agency. Researchers working on childhood and young people remind us that the idea of agency is a complicated one. Children and young people, with their specific generational position and inter- and intra-generational relationships, have several opportunities for as well as constraints to act. Robson et al. (in Tisdall and Punch 2012, 14) describe "a continuum of agency, which varies depending on opportunistic and constrained contexts, created and expected identities, positions of power/lessness, life course stage, and state of emotions and wellbeing". Klocker (2007) suggests a notion of thick and thin agency that can be helpful in understanding this continuum of constrained agency of children and young people (85). In the context of this emphasis on children's participation and agency, Bluebond-Langner and Korbin (2007) ask a crucial question, about vulnerability. Vulnerability may be in the context of structural restraints, or may include deprivation, which is interpersonal in nature, or may even be a lack of adequate internal/intrapsychic resources, or it could be the result of an interplay of all these.