

Curry and Conversation: Lesbians in India

ANNA LEACH travels to the buzzing capital, New Delhi, to meet Sangini, India's first lesbian support group

Known to Westerners for silk, spices and call centres, India can be a hot, noisy shock for the naive tourist. People, cows and motorbikes fill the streets and smells of masala spices mingle with open-air toilets in the hot sunshine, giving your average Brit a sensory overload - and sunburn.

If you're new to India, seeing this many women with body-piercings and tattoos is pleasant - but confusing. Nose-studs in Delhi are more likely to be part of a dowry here than they are in Soho, and with 46% of Indian women getting married before the age of 16 (according to UNICEF statistics), the girl with a nice smile opposite you on the bus has probably been married since she was 15.

Delhi boasts Tibetan monks, cappuccinos and Moghul forts, but apart from a drunk-looking male transvestite stumbling around Delhi's central shopping area in a sari, we didn't spot any signs of a gay scene. So it's nice to meet my first bona fide Indian lesbian. Maya Shankar is a leader of the Delhi-based lesbian support group Sangini, set up in 1997 and the first openly-lesbian organisation in the country.

When I arrive in the south Delhi suburb where Sangini is based, Maya is in the front yard of the group's house, wearing an Aertex top, sitting on a small rocking horse and watering plant pots. Over water and gobi masala in the quiet sitting room, she introduces me to a few other group members. Cheerful and self-assured, Maya is also infectiously giggly. I'm expecting saris and sob stories, but the ladies are sitting around discussing boob competitions, dance performances and a party-oriented lesbian social group in Agra (better know for the Taj Mahal).

Maya is Indian but grew up in Vienna, where she did a research project on lesbians in India. 'I asked my father about it. He said: "There are no such people in India". So I did my own research and found out about Sangini.' Maya came over to Delhi University for a year, joined the group and stayed. 'I found it weird going to a lesbian support group. I've never been to a support group for any other aspect of my life, so why should I go to a lesbian one? But seven years later, I'm still here. Maybe I did need support...'

Sangini comes up against a lot in its struggle to raise lesbian rights and issues. Primarily ignorance. 'Some people think it's infectious,' Maya says. Founder and co-leader Betu Singh relays the sort of questions she gets: 'One think it's infectious,' Maya says. Founder and co-leader Betu Singh relays the sort of questions she gets: 'One female Indian journalist asked me, "Where do you get all these lesbians from?"' Typically, India's law banning 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature' is used against gay men but never women, because officially lesbians don't exist. 'Some people think it's infectious. One female Indian journalist asked, "Where do you get all these lesbians from?"'

Thanks to Sangini's work and to Deepa Mehta's 1999 film *Fire*, with its lesbian love theme, lesbian and bisexual women have recently had a higher profile in India. But before 1997, there were no such organisations in the country, and Sangini only started thanks to Betu and a chance encounter with a British woman. Betu is of the Rajput caste, from the same family as the maharajas whose misdemeanours at Oxford occasionally end up in the English tabloids. She has a certain authoritative way of smoking a cigarette, but she gets a little coy discussing the start-up of Sangini.

'This story is gossip - I charge for it.' Betu says. 'I met this girl... She was dancing with a group of gay men at a club. She pointed me out to a mutual friend and said, "I'm sure that girl is a dyke". He said that he knew me and that I wasn't. Sometime later, a friend told me that somebody wanted to meet me. He took me to the toilets and she was there... and so we got involved.'

Kat was a British woman working in an NGO in India - Betu had been with other women before, but never one who self-defined as lesbian. 'I said to her that I just felt like I was the only one.' So Kat got Betu to set up Sangini. Another friend at Indian charity the Naz Foundation gave them some space to house the group, and after two years they got enough funding to set up their helpline.

Betu and Maya run the helpline from their sitting room, and talk to women from all across India. It's Sangini's biggest project. Betu explains why women ring the helpline: 'The main problem is marriage pressure, then being lonely, growing old and being alone, or being confused. And sometimes religion comes up if the woman's a Christian - she'll ask if she's committing a sin. Also sex changes are a big problem. Some feel that after a sex change they'll be accepted by their community.'

WEDDING WORRIES

It's not surprising that marriage pressure is the biggest single problem facing Indian lesbians. To quote an editorial from Indian women's magazine *Gladrags*: 'From the time a little girl turns into a young girl, the one goal of her family and her is that she attracts a good husband'. Maya says, 'A lot of our members are 25-35. That's often the time you have been with a girlfriend for five years and then she has to get married. That's a lot of heartbreak.'

Marriage was the first objection that Anurima's family raised when she told them she was gay. Of Indian descent, Anurima is a Canadian citizen now living in New York: 'It wasn't religious; it was all about not getting married.' Poised, with a slow American drawl, Anurima is staying in the Sangini guesthouse while doing research in Delhi University on dance, and describes the differences between being out in New Delhi and out in New York: 'I was part of Sangini when I used to live in Delhi. Sometimes it can be difficult being out in this city - so having a connection with Indian dykes and being able to be yourself changes your experience. I'm out in limited ways in Delhi, but anywhere you have to be careful. Where I live in New York my girlfriend and I don't hold hands - it depends on the neighbourhood.'

Betu is surprised: 'You can't hold hands with your girlfriend?' 'I live in the Bronx,' explains Anurima, 'Not out there, no way. If you don't want to be bashed, you have to be careful. In India there's much more same-sex affection but it's not sexualised, necessarily - the hidden aspect makes more things possible.' It's not just the secrecy that makes the Indian lesbian scene different from Britain. The class distinctions and patriarchy that play big roles in Indian society impact on lesbian life. The butch/ femme thing is too much in India, according to new member Gaythra, just up from Bangalore. The heavy influence of hetero living patterns, Maya explains, can distort lesbian relationships. 'Women cut their breasts off for their girlfriends. People do daft things for their girlfriends. They want to think they're with a man, but obviously it's not very convincing... You need a background in feminist issues to get over that pattern. Growing up in India, your role models are your family, so when you get attracted to women you either think that she's a man or that you are.'

THE L WORD

Gaythra, with big eyes and a good sense of humour, is a student in Delhi and has a girlfriend back in Bangalore. Her story is hopefully a more normal take on growing up lesbian in India. 'I'm from a relatively liberal family, so I thought coming out would be OK, but it wasn't... It was all religious problems. My mum's Catholic and my dad is Presbyterian. We had 'family councils', as they were called: they'd sit around the table, pull out the Bible and quote stuff at me.

'I didn't stop bringing my girlfriend home, and then I left, as they were being obnoxious about it. But now it's like a non-issue. They just try to pretend we don't have sex.' The group's members are mostly well educated and English-speaking. 'We do have people from all strata of society, but we can only advertise in English-language papers so our members are generally from the middle classes. However, lots of the MSM boys [group for gay men] do their cruising all over the place and meet a lot of people - often working-class - and they'll refer women on to us.' Maya says.

Betu asks me my who favourite character is on *The L Word*. 'I'm waiting for Season Four, I was totally hooked on that,' she says. 'It's very easy to watch.' Betu smiles, proving that some experiences are the same wherever you go. Maya is upbeat about the future for lesbian and bisexual women in India, based on its history of tolerance and melting-pot culture. 'India has complete potential to change. You grow up with 50 million different things - you know that they exist and you just get on with it. I think things will get better.'