

## Kothi

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Kothi (also spelled *koti* and *khoti*) is an identity that in contemporary India and Bangladesh is used by many effeminate men to signal their preference for being receptive (bottom) partners during sexual intercourse among men who have sex with men (MSM). While kothi-identified men often term their penetrative (top) partner “panthi,” unlike kothi, panthi is a classification that the penetrative partners rarely use as an identity. Recognized within sexual rights discourse in India as a distinct identity within the broader umbrella of MSM, kothi is often cited as the “indigenous” or “localized” counterpart to Western categories of gay and bisexual which have become more popular over the last two decades. Kothi-identified men are often not fluent in English and belong to poor or working class backgrounds. Poor and working class men can rarely afford to participate in the mainstream gay culture in India, much of which largely exists online (on English language websites) or is concentrated in urban bars and exclusive nightclubs. Several members of the kothi communities, as well as activists organizing for sexual rights, regard the importance of kothi identity as resisting the increasingly homogenizing influence of the “global gay” culture enabled by late twentieth and early twenty-first-century globalization (Altman 2001).

Being a kothi typically implies embodying feminine mannerisms and demeanor. However, unlike hijra-identified individuals, most of whom permanently embody the third gendered identity and many of whom

undergo castration, kothi-identified men largely engage in stereotypical performances of femininity such as exaggerated limp wrist, hip-swaying, and sexual bantering. Kothis often deploy the feminine pronoun when referring to other kothis. Like many MSMs in India, many kothi-identified men are also married, have children, and live heteronormative lives when not embodying the kothi identity. Some hijras also refer to themselves as kothi (in addition to being hijra) by the virtue of desiring to be penetrated during sexual intercourse. However, they have regional distinction to distinguish themselves from kothi-identified men such as *kada-catla koti* (in Hyderabad), which refers to kothis who dress in masculine attire and do not undergo any sex-change operation (Reddy 2005, 219).

The origins of the term are ambiguous, but scholars have rooted it in South India where the term has several regional meanings (Cohen 2005; Reddy 2005). Kothi continues to be used as an epithet to demarcate effeminate male-bodied individuals, similar to terms like “fag” and “sissy.” However, in the mid-1990s, kothi was co-opted as sexual identity within the institutional discourse of the NAZ Foundation, a non-governmental organization (NGO) which works on issues related to sexual health and HIV/AIDS prevention among MSMs in India. Popularization of kothi classification within the HIV/AIDS prevention models created a “rift” over resources and political ideologies between organizations working with MSMs (Cohen 2005; Gupta 2005; Boyce 2007).

In the late 1990s, as communities of kothis started claiming more visible space within the burgeoning sexual rights movement in India, playing active roles as outreach workers and peer educators in various HIV/AIDS

prevention campaigns, many kothis also experienced prejudice and discrimination by members of mostly gay male social groups and organizations, some of whom refused to include kothi-identified men into their social space. Several men in Mumbai's gay male social groups stopped attending meetings and threatened to boycott nightclubs if kothis were allowed to participate (Gupta 2005). This divide between the members of mostly English-speaking middle-class gay communities and non-English speaking working-class kothi communities has exposed the fissures within the sexual rights activism in India, where class, caste, and gender differences continue to pervade, revealing a fractured movement with varying social and political agendas. Since the HIV/AIDS crisis, communities of kothis and hijras have organized around their chosen identities, demanding recognition within what is often called the "LGBTQK movement," the later three letters of the acronym representing kothi, queer, and hijra (Gupta 2005).

Frequently singled out for their gendered presentation, many kothi-identified men experience greater instances of homophobia and violence, adding to their sense of marginalization (Shah and Bondyopadhyay 2007). Issues such as low self-esteem often contribute to greater willingness to have unprotected sex, which places them at a higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (Seabrook 1999). Kothi-identified men have also reported experiencing greater discrimination in the workplace or when looking for employment. Many of the men who identify as kothi engage in sex work. Kothi sex workers are often harassed, robbed, and sexually assaulted by the police.

Learning from hijras, many kothi-identified men have started banding together

to form communities of "neighborhood gangs" where members of a particular gang look out for each other's safety and well-being (Reddy 2005, 48). Since the Delhi High Court struck down colonial-era sodomy laws in 2009, decriminalizing homosexuality pending the Indian Supreme Court's review of the judgment, there has been a greater visibility of sexual and gender minorities overall. However, many kothi-identified men continue to face stigma and discrimination.

SEE ALSO: *Hijra/Hejira*; LGBT Activism in South Asia; Same-Sex Sexuality in India

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