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Managing Gay, Bisexual and Queer Identities in Nepal:
Strategies of Visibility, Belonging and Resistance within Family
and Society

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Abstract (English)

This master thesis explores the lived experiences of people, who identify as gay, bisexual and queer (GBQ) in Nepal, with a focus on Kathmandu Valley. Despite political recognition and legal advancements – including the granting of rights to sexual and gender minorities in Nepal’s 2015 Constitution – societal and familial structures continue to uphold discrimination, marginalisation and emotional struggles for GBQ individuals as they navigate prevailing expectations.

The study is based on three months of fieldwork in Kathmandu Valley between June and September 2024. The research primarily draws on autobiographical narratives of ten Nepalese GBQ individuals, gathered through semi-structured, narrative interviews and informal dialogues to explore their experiences in relation to society and family life. Moreover, the research includes participant observations during Pride Month in June and other PoMSOGIESC+ events in July and August. The collected data was meticulously, documented, protocolled, transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, 2013, 2022).

The research investigates on four main themes: (1) Heteronormativity, heterosexism, and constraints on gender and sexual expression; (2) family as framework and boundary; (3) becoming oneself – stages of gay, bisexual and queer identity development and (4) between coming out and ‘coming with’.

The first theme focuses on how heteronormativity and heterosexism within Nepali societal structures, shape, constrain and frequently suppress the gender and sexual expression of GBQ individuals. Drawing on theories *Doing Gender* by Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) and *Gender Performativity* by Judith Butler (1988), it is highlighted how participants of this study modify their behaviour to align with prevailing norms, often as a strategy of self-protection. A significant number of participants reported experiences of bullying, discrimination, and internalised pressure to conform, especially when expressing femininity outside expected conventional gender roles. The findings illustrate how societal expectations affect both external expression and internal identity, revealing the tension between conformity and resistance.

The second theme investigates how family, as a central and often close-knit institution in Nepal, significantly, exerts an influence on the experiences of GBQ individuals as well as the expression of their gender and sexual identity. Participants described familial expectations – particularly those around heterosexual marriage and gender-conformity – as major obstacles to

coming out, often resulting in their silence, emotional distance, or despair. While some developed coping strategies to navigate these pressures, others experienced forms of acceptance, highlighting the diversity of familial responses to non-heteronormativity, for example queerness. The findings emphasise how, for instance, heteronormative ideals surrounding marriage, reproduction and gender-conformity reinforce exclusion, while simultaneously positioning the family as a key source of support. As such, the family emerges as both a site of care and constraint for GBQ individuals in Nepal.

The third theme examines the development of gay, bisexual and queer identity of the study's participants, drawing on frameworks proposed by Anthony D'Augelli (1994a, 1994b) and Shoshana Rosenberg (2018). The findings highlight the non-linear, socially embedded, and intersectional nature of identity formation, which is shaped by personal experiences, societal norms, and access to supportive networks. Although each participant's journey is unique, shared stages – such as early awareness, exploration, self-acceptance and moments of concealment – emerge across most narratives.

The fourth theme explores the varied disclosure experiences of GBQ individuals in Nepal, shaped by prevailing social norms and the central role of family in collectivistic environments. While only a few participants were fully open about their identities, most practiced selective disclosure due to fears of discrimination, social exclusion, and disruption of familial harmony. The analysis contrasts classical 'coming out' frameworks with the culturally presupposed model of 'coming with', in which individuals sensitise their families to queer-related topics and at the time gradually introduce their identities within their families. By tracing how participants navigate disclosure across different relationships and contexts, the findings highlight both emotional challenges and the possibilities for change that come with more gradual, personal ways of being openly queer.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Erfahrungen von Personen in Nepal, die sich als homosexuell (gay), bisexuell und queer (GBQ) identifizieren. Der lokale Fokus liegt auf dem Kathmandu-Tal. In der nepalesischen Verfassung sind Rechte für sexuelle Minderheiten seit 2015 verankert. Trotz politischer Anerkennung und rechtlicher Fortschritte bleibt das alltägliche Leben für viele PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal herausfordernd. Gesellschaftliche und familiäre Strukturen haben weiterhin Diskriminierung, Marginalisierung und emotionale Konflikte zur Folge. Die Arbeit untersucht, wie GBQ Personen mit vorherrschenden heteronormativen Erwartungen umgehen. Die Studie, die dieser Arbeit zugrunde liegt, basiert auf einer dreimonatigen Feldforschung, die im Kathmandu-Tal zwischen Juni und September 2024 durchgeführt wurde. Die Forschung stützt sich in erster Linie auf autobiografische Erzählungen von zehn Nepales*innen, die sich entweder als homo-, bisexuell oder queer identifizieren. Mit den Teilnehmenden wurden halbstrukturierte und narrative Interviews sowie informeller Gespräche geführt, die für ihre sexuelle Identität spezifische Erfahrungen in Bezug auf Gesellschaft und Familie abbilden. Darüber hinaus umfasst die Feldforschung teilnehmende Beobachtung während des Pride Month im Juni und anderer PoMSOGIESC+ Veranstaltungen im Juli und August. Die gesammelten Daten wurden dokumentiert, protokolliert, transkribiert und anschließend anhand der reflexiven thematischen Analyse nach Virginia Braun und Victoria Clarke (2006, 2013, 2022) ausgewertet.

In der Analyse bildeten sich vier Hauptthemen hervor: (1) Heteronormativität, Heterosexismus und Beschränkungen des Geschlechts und des sexuellen Ausdrucks; (2) Familie als Struktur und Begrenzung; (3) Stadien der homo-, bisexuellen und queeren Identitätsentwicklung und (4) Prozesse des Coming-out und ‚Coming-with‘.

Thema (1) untersucht, inwiefern Heteronormativität und Heterosexismus innerhalb der Gesellschaftsstrukturen Nepals den geschlechtlichen und sexuellen Ausdruck von GBQ Personen im Kathmandu-Tal beeinflussen. Unter Bezugnahme auf Theorien wie Doing Gender von Candace West und Don Zimmerman (1987) und Gender Performativity von Judith Butler (1988) wird hervorgehoben, wie die Teilnehmer*innen dieser Studie ihr Verhalten an vorherrschenden Normen anpassen – oft als Strategie des Selbstschutzes. Die Teilnehmenden berichten von Erfahrungen mit Mobbing, Diskriminierung und verinnerlichtem Anpassungsdruck, insbesondere wenn sie ihre feminine Seite außerhalb der erwarteten konventionellen Geschlechterrollen zum Ausdruck bringen. Die Ergebnisse veranschaulichen,

wie gesellschaftliche Erwartungen das äußere Auftreten wie auch die Identität beeinflussen und zeigen ein Spannungsfeld zwischen Konformität und Widerstand auf.

Thema (2) befasst sich damit, wie Familie als zentrale Institution in Nepal einen signifikanten Einfluss auf die Erfahrungen von GBQ Personen sowie auf den Ausdruck ihrer sexuellen Identität ausübt. Die Teilnehmer*innen beschrieben familiäre Erwartungen – insbesondere in Bezug auf die heterosexuelle Ehe und die Geschlechtskonformität – als große Hindernisse für ihr Coming-out. Auf den Druck dieser Erwartungen reagierten sie mit Schweigen und Passivität, emotionaler Distanz und/oder Verzweiflung. Einige Teilnehmende entwickelten Bewältigungsstrategien, andere erlebten Akzeptanz, was die Vielfalt familiärer Reaktionen auf Queerness verdeutlicht. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass heteronormative Ideale in Bezug auf Ehe, Fortpflanzung und Geschlechtskonformität Ausgrenzung verstärken. Gleichzeitig zeigen die Ergebnisse auch, dass die Familie als wichtige Quelle der Unterstützung positioniert werden kann. Familie wird sowohl ein Ort der Fürsorge als auch der Einschränkung für GBQ Personen in Nepal sichtbar.

Thema (3) untersucht die Entwicklung der homo-, bissexuellen und queeren Identität der Studienteilnehmer*innen. Dabei wird sich auf die Rahmengerüste der Identitätsentwicklung von Anthony D’Augelli (1994a, 1994b) und Shoshana Rosenberg (2018) gestützt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Identitätsbildung nicht linear verläuft, sondern sozial eingebettet und intersektional geprägt ist. Identitätsbildung wird maßgeblich von persönlichen Erfahrungen, gesellschaftliche Normen und den Zugang zu unterstützenden Netzwerken beeinflusst. Obwohl die Identitätsfindung jedes Teilnehmenden einzigartig ist, zeigen sich gemeinsame Phasen: Frühes Bewusstwerden, Erkundung, Selbstakzeptanz und Momente des Verbergens.

Zuletzt befasst sich Thema (4) mit den unterschiedlichen Coming-out-Erfahrungen von GBQ Personen in Nepal. Diese sind von den vorherrschenden sozialen Normen und der zentralen Rolle der Familie in einem kollektivistischen Umfeld geprägt. Während nur wenige Teilnehmer*innen ihre Identität vollständig offenlegten, praktizierten die meisten ein selektives Coming-out aus Angst vor Diskriminierung, sozialer Ausgrenzung und Störung der familiären Harmonie. Die Analyse kontrastiert klassische Coming-out-Konzepte mit dem kulturell-spezifischen Model des ‚Coming-with‘, bei dem Personen ihre Familien für queere Themen sensibilisieren und ihre Identitäten nach und nach preisgeben. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, wie die Teilnehmer*innen das Coming-out in unterschiedlichen Kontexten gestalten, und machen dabei sowohl die emotionalen Herausforderungen als auch das Veränderungspotenzial deutlich, das in einem schrittweisen und persönlichen Umgang mit Queer-Sein liegt.

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1 Introduction

Humans do not exist in isolation from their surroundings. Our behaviour is formed within the tension between internal needs and external influences. In many ways, we are profoundly shaped by the people around us, as well as by broader social structures, norms and values into which we are socialised – structures that continue to shape our lives long after childhood. These influences affect not only how we behave, but also how we think, feel, and understand ourselves and the world.

From early on, we are embedded in processes of socialisation. Through our families, schools, peer groups, and media, we learn what is considered ‘normal’, ‘appropriate’, and ‘desirable’ – messages that vary across cultural contexts but are often internalised without conscious awareness. Social norms provide orientation and a sense of order within the system we live in, but at the same time they exert pressure to fit in. Consciously and unconsciously, we adjust our behaviour to gain acceptance and avoid rejection, even when such conformity clashes with internal needs, desires and beliefs.

Societal structures determine which ways of living are recognised as legitimate and which are not. These structures are often shaped by heteronormativity – an ideological framework that positions heterosexuality and binary gender-conformity as the default or ideal. Conforming to this framework should not be a requirement for social acceptance and belonging. But heteronormativity operates as an exclusionary system: It marginalises and delegitimises those whose ways of being, loving, and expressing themselves fall outside this narrow confines. In doing so, it creates hierarchies of worth and belonging, limiting the possibilities for those who do not – or cannot - conform.

This raises crucial questions about the lived experiences of those who exist outside heteronormative boundaries: How do individuals whose identities diverge from heteronormative expectations forge paths of self-determination, visibility, and belonging? What happens to those whose basic human needs, such as the desire for connection, belonging and intimacy, do not align with the way of life that heteronormativity prescribes? How do individuals whose desires, expressions and embodiments fall beyond conventional notions of masculinity and femininity navigate a world where their identities are often rendered invisible, stigmatises, or unsafe? And ultimately, how narrow is the line between living one’s truth and facing social marginalisation?

These reflections on socialisation, normativity, and belonging show how emotionally and psychologically difficult it can be to live in a society that only accepts and validates certain

ways of being. Building on this the following chapter introduces the broader context of this study and gives a comprehensive overview of the topic of this thesis. It describes the legal landscape for PoMSOGIESC+ individuals in Nepal and the historical context behind it. It also explores the constitution of gender in South Asia and discusses the central role of family and marriage in Nepali society. Selected current research on LGBTQIA+ topics in India and Nepal is outlined, followed by the problem statement, research questions, and the aim of this study.

1.1 Overview of the Topic

Dominant systems like heteronormativity do not just affect how others see and treat people, they also shape how individuals understand themselves. The influence of dominant social norms is not abstract, but has tangible effects that are shaped and experienced differently depending on the particular cultural, familial, societal setting someone lives in. In other words, these norms play out in specific social contexts in concrete ways, influencing people's lives according to the unique values, traditions and expectations of those contexts.

In this thesis, the context under examination is Nepal, more precisely Kathmandu Valley, where heteronormative expectations are intertwined with tradition, kinship, and social respectability. The individuals in focus are members of the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Nepal, that challenge such expectations by their very way of being. A powerful entry point into understanding the emotional weight of navigating queer identity in this setting is Shuby Bhattarai's poem "Clothes of Confession" (2022), which captures the experience of living as a trans-masculine person in Nepali society:

"Knock. Knock. Knock.
I drum my fingers along the closet door,
Picking through garment folds,
Yet still being buried by someone else's clothes.
Someone else's perception of who I should be.
Who's perception of me should I be?

Navigating the uncomfortable with faked
confidence,
Burying discomfort with a smile.
I'd rather hide my body in baggy hand-me-downs
jeans and t-shirts than be made to wear flowy
skirts and form-fit kurtas.

This closet traps me.

Who am I?
Not straight, neither male nor female.
I want to be just me,
wrapped in my comfortable jeans and hooded
sweater.

I am my own perception of myself.
Slowly unburying myself.
Folding aside the garments.
I shut the closet door, drumming on the door.
Knock, knock, knock.” (Bhattarai 2022)

Through this poem, Shuby articulates the struggle of personal needs conflicting with societal expectations which resonates with many of the participants in this research. Using the metaphor of a closet, the poem captures how societal norms restrict the speaker’s true self and convey a sense of confinement and restlessness. The imagery of “drumming fingers along the closet door” and being “buried by someone else’s clothes” evokes feelings of entrapment and disconnection from imposed roles by others. The speaker’s preference for comfortable, baggy clothing contrasts with the societal pressure to wear “flowy skirts and form-fit kurtas”, to conform traditional feminine attire. This symbolises the tension between individuality and traditional gender expectations.

This poem highlights the act of performing an identity for external approval while at the same time longing for self-expression. By rejecting binary labels and asserting the desire to be simply “me”, Shuby challenges restrictive definitions of gender. The act of “unburying” their true self, symbolised by folding aside garments, reflects a courageous process of shedding imposed roles and embracing their chosen identity. The recurring “knock, knock, knock” emphasises the persistence and hope required to free oneself from such constraints.

This poignant poetic expression offers a lens to understand the broader challenges faced by Nepal’s PoMSOGIESC+ community and parallels the experiences of the participants in this study. This research explores the lived realities of gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ) individuals as they move within complex familial and social environments shaped by dominant heteronormative expectations. Through detailed narratives, the study reveals how participants develop and negotiate their identities, and to what extent they can authentically express their identities and live out their sexual orientation within families, schools, workplaces, and public life.

In Nepal, social life is deeply rooted in familial and collective structures, where kinship, honour and social perception play central roles. Within these settings, heteronormative values – such as heterosexual, cisgender marriage as a key milestone in life, binary gender roles and gender-conforming behaviour – remain dominant, even though changes have occurred over time. For PoMSOGIESC+ individuals, these prevailing norms often lead to conflicts, as the expectations reinforced by family and society do not align with their identities, desires, interests, expressions and embodiments. As a result, many PoMSOGIESC+ individuals feel compelled to conceal their identities to avoid stigma and protect family reputation. Despite Nepal's emerging reputation as a role model for PoMSOGIESC+ rights in South Asia, the lived realities of the people concerned is more complex. Societal and familial expectations continue to strongly shape how PoMSOGIESC+ identities are experienced and expressed. This study investigates how GBQ individuals in Kathmandu Valley navigate and negotiate these social and familial pressures. It explores forms of discrimination they encounter, how they construct and express their sexual identities within intersecting cultural contexts, and their experiences with coming out. Employing an ethnographic approach, utilising participant observation, auto-biographical narrative and semi-structured interviews, and informal dialogues, this research offers insight into the complex realities of GBQ individuals living under the influence of heteronormative values, highlighting the ongoing tension between personal identity and societal expectations. The autobiographical narratives gathered through interviews and casual conversations in this study provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of the participants. Central to this research is the exploration of how their GBQ identities have developed from childhood to present, and what factors have impacted this process. The theoretical frameworks of Anthony D'Augelli's (1994a, 1994b) 'Life-span Identity' model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development and Shoshana Rosenberg's (2018) approach to queer identity formation and her concept of 'coming in' were primarily used to guide this inquiry.

The study further investigates the role of family in participants' lives, examining the extent to which heteronormativity is enacted within familial contexts, how GBQ individuals navigate these norms, and the degree to which they can openly express their sexual identities. The study also considers other social environments, such as schools, public spaces and workplaces, tracing identity development and expression biographically from childhood through adulthood.

Another key focus are experiences of discrimination and heterosexism encountered by participants. The research highlights how heteronormative expectations and experiences of stigma, bullying and harassment have led some individuals to adjust their behaviour and appearance to conform to gender norms, thereby avoiding (further) social marginalisation. The

tool to analyse such adaptations were provided by Candace West and Don Zimmerman's (1987) concept of 'Doing Gender' and Judith Butler's (1988) 'Gender Performativity' – both integral frameworks to Gender Studies and Queer Theory.

Moreover, the study explores the process of coming out, understood as the disclosure of non-heteronormative sexual orientation to family, peers, and the broader public – a process necessitated by the prevalence of societal heteronormativity (see Achar, Gopal 2023: 160). While coming out has long been seen central to LGBTQIA+ identity formation in Eurocentric contexts, often framed as a crucial step toward self-acceptance and social visibility, this model does not necessarily apply universally. In many contexts outside the Global North, such as South Asia, identity is shaped by familial, social and religious structures where collective belonging often takes precedence over individual expression. Here, publicly revealing one's sexual or gender identity can have different social consequences. Rather than a singular event, coming out is often a gradual and context-sensitive process, shaped by the need to maintain familial harmony and social cohesion. This has prompted scholars to propose alternative frameworks such as Shuzhen Huang and Daniel Brouwer's (2018) concept of 'coming with', which describes the gradual signalling and enactment of GBQ identities without direct disclosure. This process, frequently occurring within family settings, emphasises subtle forms of identity expression and queer awareness-raising as strategies to navigate restrictive social environments.

Structure of this Thesis

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the historical and legal landscape of PoMSOGIESC+ right in Nepal. While Nepal is often internationally praised as highly progressive compared to its South Asian neighbour-states – having had an openly queer parliamentarian and a constitution that recognises gender and sexual minorities – the reality remains complex. Legal provisions, such as those guaranteeing equality and citizenship rights for third-gender individuals, are in place, however, bureaucratic obstacles, unclear implementations, especially regarding same-sex marriage, and societal discrimination persist. The chapter then shifts to the conceptualisation of gender in South Asia, highlighting the influence of Hinduism, colonial and modernisation processes, such as European epistemology, education, capitalism, and (neo-)liberalism. It also discusses family structures in the region, with a focus on collectivist values, gender roles, and the central role of heterosexual marriage. Finally, a review of relevant research from India and Nepal is presented, followed by the articulation of the study's problem statement, research questions, and aims.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework. It draws on Queer Theory, particularly concepts such as heteronormativity, heterosexism, Doing Gender and Gender Performativity. Models of LGBTQIA+ identity development are presented alongside the act of coming out, with attention given to culturally specific alternatives such as ‘coming in’, ‘coming home’ and ‘coming with’. These frameworks offer more context-sensitive approaches to expressing and disclosing one’s identity.

Chapter 3 details the research strategy and methodology. It examines the ethnographic design of the fieldwork, including participant observation, biographical-narrative and semi-structured interviews. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the analytical approach, which is based on reflexive thematic analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings. It begins with ethical considerations and a thorough reflection on the research process, including fieldwork preparation, participant access, interview settings, and methodological challenges. The findings are structured into four thematic sections. The first theme ‘Heteronormativity, heterosexism, and constraints on gender and sexual expression’ explores how normative gender expectations, heterosexism and discrimination impact the visibility, expression, and self-perception of GBQ individuals in various social settings. The second theme ‘family as framework and boundary’ examines the central role of family in shaping identity and behaviour, and the pressure to conform to expectations such as heterosexual marriage. The third theme ‘becoming oneself – stages of gay, bisexual and queer (GBQ) identity development’ traces participants identity formation processes from childhood to the present, illustrating how they navigate, resist, or reinterpret social norms in their own lives. The fourth and last theme ‘between coming out and coming with’ analyses diverse coming out experiences and the reasons from non-disclosure, introducing alternative approaches such as ‘coming with’, which reflects a gradual, non-confrontational process of disclosure. This chapter concludes by discussing the findings in relation to the research questions.

Chapter 5, the conclusion, offers a hopeful outlook by highlighting how PoMSOGIESC+ individuals in Nepal are contributing to progressive social change and expressing optimism for the future. The chapter also outlines possibilities for further research building on the current study.

Notes on Terminology and the Use of Software Tools

Regarding my terminology, when referring specifically to my study and findings, I use the term GBQ, as my participants identify as gay, bisexual, or queer. I use the term PoMSOGIESC+ which stands for ‘People of Marginalized Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Sex

Characteristics and Others’ to refer to LGBTQIA+ topics related to Nepal and the Nepali LGBTQIA+ community. The term was coined in 2019 by Nepali activists (see LGBTQIA+ Wiki 2021; Queer Youth Group, Queer Rights Collective 2020). In all other contexts – such as the broader community in (South) Asia or worldwide, I use LGBTQIA+ and queer. When referring explicitly to literature, I adopt the terminology used by the original authors.

I transcribed the interviews partly myself and with the help of the AI transcription service TurboScribe. For the coding process, I used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. In the writing process of this thesis, I made use of AI-based language tools, particularly DeepL Translator and DeepL Write as well as ChatGPT. These tools were used to support the translation and refinement of my text, specifically regarding grammar and style.

1.2 History of PoMSOGIESC+ Rights Movement and Today’s Legal Environment in Nepal

Legal environments directly affect the lived experiences of PoMSOGIESC+ individuals. Despite Nepal’s emerging reputation as a role model for PoMSOGIESC+ rights in South Asia (see Knight 2017), the movement itself is relatively nascent, having taken root at the beginning of the 21st century. To gain a broad understanding of the PoMSOGIESC+ movement in Nepal and the present legal environment regarding PoMSOGIESC+ rights, it is necessary to thoroughly delve into the country’s history to understand the socio-political contexts for the start of the movement’s inception.

Nepal’s transition to a democratic multi-party system has been characterised by periods of turbulence. Since the mid-19th century, and particularly from the 1950s onwards, Nepal’s forms of governance have experienced constant fluctuations, leading to growing dissatisfaction among the population (see Whelpton 2005: 79; Krämer 1991). Following the restoration of democracy in 1990 – an achievement driven by the People’s Movement¹ – the population gained increased participatory rights. The same year, a multiparty parliamentary system was established, combining a constitutional monarchy with an executive Prime Minister. In May 1991, Nepal held its first parliamentary elections (see Michaels 2018: 111f).

¹ The People’s Movement of Nepal was a multifaceted political phenomenon triggered by a combination of domestic discontent and external pressures, notably from India. The movement emerged as a response to a variety of grievances, including economic hardships, political repression, and demands for democratic reforms. The movement was characterised by a diverse coalition of political parties, civil society groups, and citizens, all united in their opposition to the Panchayat system and their desire for political pluralism and social justice. It involved mass protests, demonstrations, and clashes with the security forces, leading to significant political upheaval and ultimately the downfall of the Panchayat regime (see Whelpton 2005: 113-117).

The significant political changes in Nepal during the 1990s set the stage for both victories and challenges in the country's PoMSOGIESC+ rights movement. The collapse of the Panchayat system (1961-1990) in which political parties were banned and the re-establishment of multi-party democracy signalled the dawn of a new era of expanded civil society engagement. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) flourished, with over 30,000 registered by 2015, as international donors shifted their support from state-led initiatives to non-governmental organisations due to concerns over government inefficiency and corruption. Furthermore, Nepal received its first foreign donor funding for HIV/AIDS initiatives in 1992, a development that played a crucial role in the formation of PoMSOGIESC+ activism (see Knight 2015: 2-8).

The emergence of the PoMSOGIESC+ rights movement in Nepal occurred within the broader context of political upheaval, characterised by a decade-long Maoist insurgency and rapidly evolving legal framework. The movement formalised within a complex legal and historical setting, shaped by Hindu traditions, remnants of British colonial influence from neighbouring India, European legal frameworks, and international law (see Knight 2015: 18).

In February 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) declared People's War² against the monarch and the elected government. The People's War in Nepal lasted from 1996 to 2006. On the 1st of June 2001, a massacre happened within the confines of royal palace in Nepal, resulting in the demise of ten members of the Nepali royal family, including King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, thereby engendering a state of profound political turbulence within the nation.

During this period, NGOs increasingly addressed human rights issues in addition to their development efforts. In 2000, initial informal gatherings and networking among sexual and gender minorities were beginning in parks located in Kathmandu Valley (see Knight 2015: 2). At approximately the same time, Sunil Babu Pant, a Nepali computer engineer, who had recently returned from living and working abroad, initiated conversations among PoMSOGIESC+ persons in a park in central Kathmandu. That park was known as a place where sex workers gathered. Concerned about the risks faced by sexual and gender minorities due to police blackmailing and unsafe sex practices, Pant sought support from American AIDS/HIV activists from the organisation ACT UP. Subsequently, Pant endeavoured to register an NGO with the government of Nepal, aiming to address the issues faced by sexual and gender

² The People's War in Nepal emerged as a response to systemic issues, local grievances (stemming from economic, social and political issues, such as poverty, no access to basic services, land disputes, marginalisation of certain ethnic groups etc.). Rooted in the mid-western hills, an area predisposed to leftist activism, the Maoist aimed to replace existing structures with a new political order. The conflict was fuelled by ethnic tensions, economic disparity and dissatisfaction with the Monarch and the parliamentary system. Despite early attempts at peaceful political engagement, the Maoists restored to armed rebellion, leading to widespread unrest and violence (see Whelpton 2005: 202-208).

minorities. However, the Social Welfare Council expressed opposition to this initiative, insisting that the primary objective of the organisation should be to promote heterosexuality. Consequently, the NGO Blue Diamond Society Nepal (BDSN) was registered as a sexual health and human rights organisation without explicitly mentioning homosexuality and other queer-related topics in the first years of its existence. Nevertheless, BDSN would go on to become a leading organisation in the PoMSOGIESC+ rights movement in Nepal. It's role as a pioneering and symbolic figure in Nepal is noteworthy. The emergence of BDSN signalled the rise of more visible and consolidated goals of PoMSOGIESC+ inclusion, safety and rights. Over time, the organisation transitioned from service delivery to advocacy, providing (legal) support and education while advocating against violence and discrimination (see *ibid.*: 8f).

During the armed conflict in Nepal, the PoMSOGIESC+ movement continued to grow despite facing significant challenges. Individuals who were vulnerable and marginalised, including members of the PoMSOGIESC+ community, experienced an escalation in violence at the hands of security forces (see Knight 2015: 10f). In 2004, as the conflict intensified in Kathmandu Valley, the PoMSOGIESC+ community bore the brunt of heightened insecurity and violence. However, the authorities entrusted with maintaining order often failed to provide protection, exacerbating the situation instead. A protest was organised in July of that year by fifty members of the Blue Diamond Society to draw attention to the issue of sexual abuse and violence against sexual and gender minorities. Instead of allowing the protest to proceed peacefully, the police violently dispersed the crowd (see *ibid.*: 18), thereby underscoring the hostile environment that PoMSOGIESC+ activists faced at that time.

Notwithstanding the challenges encountered, BDSN demonstrated a steadfast commitment to its mission. In addition to providing legal support to transgender individuals who had been arrested on questionable charges, and offering fundamental sexual health education, the organisation expanded its activities to include the establishment of a community-driven rights-based movement. By facilitating the exchange of experiences among its members, BDSN has contributed to the promotion of awareness regarding gender, sexuality, and fundamental human rights within the PoMSOGIESC+ community itself (see Knight 2015: 10f).

During this period, BDSN also assisted individuals facing extreme threats due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. In 2005, the organisation supported Laxmi Ghalan and Meera Bajracharya, a lesbian couple, in their escape from grave threats of sexual violence and death at the hands of their families. Their personal experiences of persecution subsequently led them to establish Mitini Nepal, an organisation which initially functioned as an extension of BDSN. Over time, it evolved into Nepal's first dedicated organisation providing services and advocacy

for FLINTA, addressing the unique challenges faced by women and the PoMSOGIESC+ community (see Knight 2015: 15).

The political climate deteriorated in early 2005 when King Gyanendra dismissed Parliament, declared himself to be Head of Government and imposed martial law under the pretext of controlling the Maoist insurgency. This action resulted in the suppression of political freedoms, and the BDSN documented and escalation in harassment and violence directed towards transgender individuals. Recognising the need for international advocacy, the organisation reached out to global human rights networks to shed light on the ongoing abuses (see Knight 2015: 20).

Amidst the prevailing socio-political unrest in Nepal, the country's substantial UN presence in the country offered BDSN a novel avenue for advocacy, thereby facilitating the integration of human rights-based principles into the UN's human rights operations in the country. This development coincided with the evolution of global discourse on sexual rights, marked by the UN's gradual incorporation of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) into its human rights framework (see Knight 2015: 21).

As previously indicated, the political landscape of the 2000s provided significant opportunities for the PoMSOGIESC+ community to engage in activism. The People's Movement, which culminated in the dissolution of the monarchy and the cessation of the People's War, enabled PoMSOGIESC+ activists to align their demands for rights and recognition with the broader democratic movement. The Comprehensive Peace Accord, signed in November 2006, which brought the 10 years armed conflict to an end, further opened space for civil society organisations, including PoMSOGIESC+ groups, to expand their advocacy efforts and secure additional external funding. Following the accord, BDSN engaged with various political parties, encouraging the incorporation of queer-related issues within their respective party manifestos. This initiative resulted in significant advancements, particularly regarding legal and constitutional recognition for sexual and gender minorities in Nepal (see UNDP, USAID 2014: 26).

Despite the growing momentum of Nepal's PoMSOGIESC+ movement, violence and discrimination persisted. In 2006, activists documented yet another surge in attacks against PoMSOGIESC+ individuals, particularly in Kathmandu Valley (see Knight 2015: 21). The same year, Human Rights Watch characterised the police's actions as a "sexual cleansing drive" (ibid.), with *metis*³ frequently targeted for violence and harassment. This campaign continued for several months, resulting in the arrest of numerous BDSN outreach workers (see ibid.).

³ Nepali term for feminine displaying, masculine bodied individuals.

Amid these challenges, BDSN and Sunil Babu Pant have intensified their advocacy efforts. Drawing inspiration from South Africa's post-apartheid transition, Pant and BDSN distributed copies of the South African constitution to political parties, using it as a model to push for the inclusion of SOGI rights in Nepal's new constitution (see Knight 2015: 30). As pressure mounted for legal recognition, the movement achieved a remarkable legal victory in December 2007 when the Supreme Court of Nepal issued a landmark ruling on PoMSOGIESC+ rights. This verdict represented the culmination of a petition that had been filed in April 2007 by members of four prominent PoMSOGIESC+ organisations – BDSN, Mitini Nepal, CruiseAIDS Nepal and Parichaya Nepal – challenging the Nepalese Government (see National Judicial Academy 2008: 262; UNDP, USAID 2014: 27). The petition requested the court to compel the government to cease its discriminatory policies and practices concerning sexual orientation and gender identity (see Knight 2015: 21).

The Supreme Court's ruling signified a pivotal moment for PoMSOGIESC+ rights in Nepal, delineating three significant legal advances: The formation of a government committee to deliberate the legalisation of same-sex marriage, the acknowledgment of a third-gender category in legal documents and the repeal of all legislation that discriminates against individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (see Knight 2015: 23).

Beyond these structural reforms, the Court also set a powerful legal precedent by affirming that homosexual and third-gender individuals should not be considered mentally ill, disabled, or sexually deviant. The Court ruled that the constitutional and human rights of these individuals must be safeguarded against discrimination (see National Judicial Academy 2008: 274ff, 279-284). The Court ruling also made remarks on the decriminalisation and destigmatisation of same-sex marriage and intercourse (see *ibid.*: 276, 285f). Additionally, the Supreme Court rejected the notion that non-heteronormative sexual orientation and gender identity is unnatural and affirmed that the selection of sexual partners and the formation of marital relations are fundamental aspects of an individual's right to self-determination (see *ibid.*: 274, 279-284).

At the time of the ruling, only five countries – the Netherlands, Canada, Belgium, South Africa and Spain – had legalised same-sex marriage, while more than eighty countries still criminalised same-sex relations. In this global context, Nepal's Supreme Court ruling represented a significant commitment to the provision of legal protections for PoMSOGIESC+ individuals, earning international recognition (see Knight 2015: 23).

The Supreme Court's ruling demonstrated how international human rights frameworks could shape national legal reforms. Nepal's legal victory became a role model for other countries

seeking PoMSOGIESC+ rights (see Knight 2015: 23). Despite the Supreme Court's decision, it remains challenging for same-sex couples to formally register their marriage.

In alignment with international practices and the evolving global society's respect for minority rights, the Supreme Court urged the Government of Nepal to establish an appropriate environment and enact legal provisions to ensure that PoMSOGIESC+ people can enjoy fundamental rights. It recommended the inclusion of provisions in the new constitution, to be drafted by the Constituent Assembly, guaranteeing non-discrimination based on 'gender identity' and 'sexual orientation', in addition to 'sex' (see National Judicial Academy 2008: 285). The Supreme Court issued a directive order to the Government of Nepal to establish a committee, to study all issues related to PoMSOGIESC+ rights and make legal provisions based on the recommendations of this committee (see *ibid.*: 286).

Following the ruling, activists began carving out social and legal space for PoMSOGIESC+ individuals, particularly by advocating for the recognition of a third-gender category in official documentation. Implementing this policy was an ambitious endeavour, but it represented a significant step towards legal and social inclusion. Nepali activists regarded this development as a crucial victory, offering greater protection and access to rights for third-gender individuals (see Knight 2015: 24).

As the PoMSOGIESC+ movement gained momentum, Nepal underwent a major political transformation. Following protracted delays and deliberations, the new governmental structure was established: A 601-member elected body, which functioned as both the Constituent Assembly and Parliament. The same representatives would serve in both capacities, thereby facilitating the concurrent governance of the nation and the drafting of its new constitution. The restructuring created an unprecedented opportunity, as it was the first time that the electoral body could include representation from ethnic and sexual minorities, as well as women (see Knight 2015: 31). Consequently, in April 2008, Sunil Babu Pant became Asia's first openly homosexual parliamentarian after being nominated as a Member of Parliament in the Constituent Assembly elections (see UNDP, USAID 2014: 26). For the PoMSOGIESC+ community, Pant's election was an immediate symbolic victory, signalling a shift towards greater political inclusion and representation (Knight 2015: 33). In May 2008, the Constitution Assembly officially declared the country a Federal Democratic Republic, thus bringing an end to the 240-year-old monarchy.

Later that year, in September, Nepal's Maoist-led government took another significant step towards PoMSOGIESC+ inclusion. The Minister of Finance formally acknowledged sexual and gender minorities in the national budget for the first time, thereby marking the government's

initial recognition of this demographic following the 2007 Supreme Court ruling (see Knight 2015: 3).

From 2009 and 2012, the PoMSOGIESC+ movement achieved a number of significant milestones. These included a shift in focus from legal victories to encompass a more active engagement in educational initiatives, media, and policymaking with the aim of promoting broader social inclusion of PoMSOGIESC+ individuals as integral members of Nepali society (see Knight 2015: 39). For a more detailed account of all events, please refer to Kyle Knight “Bridges to Justice: Case Study of LGBTI Rights in Nepal” (2015).

Building on its 2007 ruling, in January 2015, the Supreme Court took another step toward legal recognition of gender diversity by ordering the government to issue passports with a third-gender option (see Knight 2015: 3).

Later that year, in September 2015, Nepal finally adopted its long-awaited constitution, solidifying a legal framework that acknowledged and protected PoMSOGIESC+ rights (see Second Constituent Assembly 2015: 6). Under Section 12, individuals possess the entitlement to acquire citizenship, with their gender identity documented under either their mother’s or father’s name. This provision assumes particular significance for third-gender individuals, as it facilitates their legal recognition (see *ibid.*: 11). Section 18 (3) unequivocally prohibits discrimination against sexual and gender minorities, thereby affirming their right to equality under the law (see *ibid.*: 16). Moreover, section 42 (1) guarantees the right to social justice for gender and sexual minorities, ensuring their inclusion in state bodies and granting them right to participate in governance and decision-making processes (see *ibid.*: 27).

Despite Nepal’s progressive legal framework for the PoMSOGIESC+ community, legal provisions for gender recognition remain inconsistent, creating significant barriers for transgender individuals. While authorities have issued identity documents with an ‘other’ gender marker since the 2007 Supreme Court ruling, the absence of a definitive central policy has resulted in confusion and ongoing discrimination. Individuals seeking to change their gender marker to ‘female’ or ‘male’ are often required to undergo surgery abroad and submit to invasive medical examinations upon their return. Furthermore, individuals applying to an ‘other’ marker encounter bureaucratic obstacles and unnecessary scrutiny (see Knight 2024). These systemic challenges extend across multiple sectors, including employment, education, and state institutions. Individuals who fall under the ‘other’ gender category continue to face restrictions on their ability to join the civil service, army, or police. Within the educational sector, discriminatory policies have effectively denied transgender students access to higher

education, as evidenced by the case of Rukshana Kapali⁴. Kapali, a transgender woman, was formally not able to enrol at Tribhuvan University because she was denied official registration on the basis that her high school transcript listed her as ‘male’ under her previous name. When she questioned about this, the university’s exam controller stated that registration was not possible under current regulations (see Gurung 2021: 1f).

Kapali is a prominent trans activist and has been at the forefront of legal battles to secure gender recognition. In 2021, she initiated a petition at the Supreme Court, contending that the inability to amend her legal documents violated her fundamental rights. She emphasises that this restriction had impeded her access to education and state resources, while exposing her to privacy violations and public humiliation. Despite numerous appeals, government authorities failed to address her concerns, leaving her with no option but to seek judicial intervention (see Supreme Court of Nepal 2025: 2ff). Her case exemplifies the broader struggles faced by Nepal’s transgender community, where legal victories often do not translate into lived equality.

In addition to the challenges previously outlined, Nepal’s legal stance on marriage equality remains unclear. The Constitution of Nepal does not explicitly address same-sex marriage (see Second Constitution Assembly 2015) and the National Civil Code Act of 2017, which came into effect in 2018, defines marriage exclusively as a union between a man and a woman. Furthermore, the National Civil Code limits marriage registration procedures to unions between men and women only (see Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs 2017: 42ff). This legislative framework reinforces a binary and gendered paradigm, thereby excluding same-sex/gender non-heteronormative relationships. However, this exclusion contradicts Section 18 (1) of the Constitution of Nepal, which guarantees equal protection under the law for all individuals, including sexual and gender minorities (see ICJ 2023).

Despite Nepal’s reputation as a regional leader in PoMSOGIESC+ rights, political instability and bureaucratic inaction resulted in stagnation with regard to marriage equality (see Sijapati, Manandhar 2019). A government-appointed committee mandated by the 2007 Supreme Court ruling, submitted an extensive report in 2015, recommending the legalisation of same-sex marriage and citing principles of equality. However, subsequent governments have consistently neglected to act on these recommendations, resulting in a state of legal uncertainty for same-sex couples (see Ganguly 2023; Gurung 2021: 2; Knight 2015: 3).

The Supreme Court of Nepal has issued a landmark interim directive in June 2023, compelling government departments to establish a provisional framework for the registration of same-sex

⁴ Rukshana Kapali is on Forbes 30 under 30 Asia 2025 under the category Social Impact for her activism: <https://www.forbes.com/profile/rukshana-kapali/> (Accessed 25.05.2025)

marriages. This development followed an accumulation of frustration, and the directive is set to transform the legal landscape of the nation. The ruling was delivered by Justice Til Prasad Shrestha, who determined that, while the prevailing Civil Code defines marriage as being between a man and a woman, the government was obligated to promptly permit same-sex couples to register their marriages, concurrently with the formulation of legislative amendments. This ruling signified that Nepal became the first South Asian country to legally recognise same-sex marriages, although the implementation of this right remained limited (see Davis 2023; Ganguly 2023).

But in 2024, Nepal took further steps toward marriage equality in response to the Supreme Court's interim order. BDSN organised a series of meetings and briefings with key government agencies, culminating in the National Symposium on Marriage Equality that facilitated dialogue between activists and policymakers. Subsequently, Sobita Gautam, a member of the parliamentary Law, Justice, and Human Rights Committee, initiated advocacy for the issue within the legislative framework. On 24th April 2024, the Department of National ID and Civil Registration, under the Ministry of Home Affairs, issued a directive to all 753 local registry offices, instructing them to begin registering same-sex marriages as per the Supreme Court's ruling. This directive was reflected in revised marriage registration forms, which now allow each applicant, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation, to choose between 'bride' and 'groom' (see Dhakal 2024). Furthermore, on 27th April 2024, the Ministry of Home Affairs directed all local administrations to maintain a temporary record of same-sex marriages within their respective jurisdictions. However, despite this progress, the current framework remains temporary and does not grant same-sex couples full rights related to property, adoption, and other marriage benefits (see ILGA Asia 2024).

To date, only a small number of same-sex and non-heterosexual marriages have been registered in Nepal, often involving a foreign spouse who must engage in legal proceedings to secure recognition to obtain a visa (see Sijapati, Manandhar 2019; Equaldex 2025). Each case underscores the persistent challenges to achieving full marriage equality in Nepal.

Despite being lauded internationally as a progressive leader in PoMSOGIESC+ rights due to its legal framework that recognises gender and sexual minorities and recent advances towards marriage equality, the reality is far more complex. Obstacles of bureaucratic nature, legal loopholes and social discrimination continue to hinder full equality, with many PoMSOGIESC+ individuals experiencing difficulties in accessing the rights they are theoretically guaranteed. As Jessica V. Birkenholtz (2022) highlighted, two distinct branches of the PoMSOGIESC+ movement currently coexist in Nepal, revealing subtle divisions within the community itself.

The first movement, often referred to as ‘old school’, emerged in the early 2000s and is led by BDSN. While not explicitly religious, this branch draws on Hindu themes, mythology, and performative traditions to frame and legitimise queer identities within a dominant cultural narrative. In contrast, since 2017, a newer, secular and intersectional movement has taken shape under the leadership of the Queer Youth Group (QYG). This second wave distances itself from Hindu frameworks, instead grounding queer activism in critical thinking, science, and intersectionality, recognising caste, ethnicity, language, and religion as integral aspects of identity. While it does not reject religion outright, this movement reframes it as one of many axes of identity, advocating for a more inclusive and multidimensional understanding of queerness in Nepal (see Birkenholtz 2022: 85f).

1.3 Gender in South Asia

Understanding gender in South Asia requires moving beyond binary frameworks that are prevalent in Judeo-Christian, North American, and European thought. These frameworks include, but are not limited to, the distinction between public and private, rational, and irrational, nature and culture, or male and female. In contrast to the fixed, essentialist definitions characterised of Judeo-Christian thinking, South Asian worldviews emphasise fluidity, transition, and complementarity (see Mitra Channa 2013: 27). Hindu philosophical concepts such as *Shiva/Purusa* and *Shakti/Prakriti*, translated as male and female cosmic principles, are not necessarily embodied as men and women but rather symbolise forces that shape the universe, operating in constant interaction (see Mitra Channa 2013: 6; Kumar 2023: 18). This philosophical perspective challenges rigid gender binaries and allows space for transitions, coexistence, and multiplicity (see Mitra Channa 2013: 4).

In the philosophical doctrines of South Asia, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, the concept of the Self (*ātman*) is believed to be devoid of gender, caste, or fixed identity, assuming diverse forms through the process of reincarnation. Contrary to the explicitly male gendered identity of God in Christianity, Vedic Hinduism does not assign a gendered identity to the Ultimate Being (see Mitra Channa 2013: 6). This notion has had a profound influence on the perception of gender in South Asia, contributing to the cultural and historical acceptability of gender transitions and non-binary identities.

Butler’s theory of Gender Performativity (1990 [1999]) challenged the notion of gender as a substantive, pre-existing reality. Butler argued that gender is constructed through repeated expression and performances rather than being an inherent identity. Thus, the mere existence of a biological body does not determine sex, desire or a binary experience of masculinity and

femininity. Butler's theory posits that gender is rather a constructed social phenomenon, influenced by the heteronormative social structures imposed by ideologies of countries of the Global North (see *ibid.*: 11-21). However, Subhadra Mitra Channa (2013) pointed out that Butler's critiques are deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian, North American and European philosophical constructs, which assume a binary sexual framework that may not be universally applicable. In contrast, South Asian perspectives on gender do not necessarily rely on the dialectical worldview that Butler critiques; rather they offer a more cyclical and fluid understanding of identity. In contrast to the context of the Global North, where heterosexuality has been institutionally established as the dominant model, South Asian traditions have historically recognised gender transitions and non-binary identities, giving them ritual and cultural significance (see *ibid.*: 12).

This fluid understanding of gender challenges rigid binaries and highlights the coexistence of multiple identities within a single framework. This is exemplified by the figure of *Ardhanarishwara*, a form of Shiva that is half-man and half-woman, thus representing the concept that gender is not a fixed biological reality but rather a continuum of existence and transformation (see Mitra Channa 2013: 4f).

The recognition of gender fluidity in South Asian traditions is evidenced by the long-standing acknowledgement of third-gender communities, particularly *hijras*. *Hijras* embody the performative aspect of gender, presenting themselves in a female appearance but their biological sex is male (see Mitra Channa 2013: 13). In English, the term *hijra* is often translated as third gender, yet in South Asia, it reflects a distinct social and cultural identity that is rooted in religious roles, traditional performances, and community structures. As asserted by Serena Nanda (1999), *hijras* are regarded as being neither men nor women and they occupy a distinctive, institutionalised role within Indian society that cannot be wholly encapsulated by European, North American gender classifications (see *ibid.*: ix-xxi). For centuries, South Asian societies have had social acceptance for *hijras*, integrating them into cultural and religious practices (see Mitra Channa 2013: 13).

This longstanding recognition of third-gender identities is also reflected in Hindu epics. In the *Mahabharata*, for instance, *Shikhandi*, born as a son of a king, is depicted as a formidable warrior yet is not categorised as either male or female, thus exemplifying a third-gendered identity. This depiction of *Shikhandi* as a warrior and a third-gender individual positions him⁵ as a figure who occupies a rightful place in society. This observation underscores the notion

⁵ Even though *Shikhandi* is neither male nor female, it is written about him with he/him pronouns.

that third-gender individuals were publicly acknowledged and had social roles in ancient times (see Mitra Channa 2013: 13f).

Today, *hijras* continue to hold a distinct, institutionally recognised status in countries such as India, Pakistan, and Nepal, where third-gender identities are legally acknowledged (see Chhetri 2021: 48). This aligns with the Hindu philosophical non-dichotomous understanding of gender, where it is perceived as performative and fluid rather than biologically fixed.

Even though gender in South Asia allows for symbolic fluidity and transition, this does not mean societies are free from patriarchy. While gender is differently delineated in South Asia, women's lived experiences are indicative of a profoundly entrenched patriarchy (see Doniger 1980 as cited in Kumar 2023: 17): Wherein the dichotomy between *Purusa* (male) and *Prakriti* (female) gives rise to inquiries concerning whether femininity serves as a wellspring of power or marginalisation (see Kumar 2023: 17f). In commonly understood Hindu philosophy, *Prakriti* is seen as powerful, creative, dynamic, intelligent, and valorous, but also potentially gets aroused and dangerously aggressive if left alone and unchecked. Conversely, *Purusa* is defined as pure consciousness, passive, and inert, yet indispensable for the restraint of *Prakriti*'s force (see Mitra Channa 2013: 8f).

This idea is vividly represented in Hindu mythology and iconography. The goddess *Kali*, an embodiment of unbridled feminine power, is depicted as a fierce, bloodthirsty force of destruction. Her rage is only contained when controlled by her husband *Shiva*. When she inadvertently steps on her husband, she immediately stops in horror, as a wife is not supposed to stand over her husband. This symbolises the notion that a woman's power must be controlled by a male figure, reinforcing the belief that an unmarried woman is to be guided by her father or brother, a wife by her husband and a widow, who exists outside direct male control, is viewed as both powerful and dangerous (see Mitra Channa 2013: 9). The *Manusmriti*, a seminal Hindu text, further codifies this notion, stating that a woman is protected by her father in childhood, by her husband in youth, and by her sons in old age, thus is never fit for independence. This control over women by men is manifested in the practice through the institution of marriage (see Ghimire et al. 2015: 320), which is discussed later on. The myth *Meenakshi* in South India is another pertinent illustration of this gendered power dynamic. Depicted as an autonomous warrior queen, *Meenakshi* is portrayed as fierce and unstoppable until she encounters *Shiva*. Upon recognising him, she immediately submits, drops her sword, and transforms into a domestic wife. This myth underscores the subjugation of *Prakriti*'s untamed vigour by *Purusa*, who, though passive ultimately exerts dominion (see Mitra Channa 2013: 10f).

The idea of regulating feminine power is not merely a subject found within the confines of Hindu mythology, it is also reflected in societal practices. Menstruating women are considered too powerful to participate in rituals, as their presence is believed to disrupt spiritual balance (see Mitra Channa 2013: 11). Meanwhile in Nepal, prepubescent girls (*kanya keti*) are revered as personifications of purity and divinity and are being worshipped in ceremonies such as *Kumari Puja*. The Nepalese tradition of the *Kumari*, in which a young girl is chosen as a living goddess and worshipped even by state officials, also highlights a woman's value is linked to her sexuality and bodily state: As soon as she reaches menstruation, she loses her divine status (see Chhetri 2021: 250).

The historical evolution of gender dynamics in South Asia has been profoundly influenced by colonialism and modernity on the Indian subcontinent. 19th-century colonial and missionary critiques of Hindu gender norms sparked both conservative backlash and reformist movements, resulting in heated debates surrounding the roles of women (see Kumar 2023: 11f). The introduction of British education and economic systems further altered gender roles: A new desire to be a 'modern Indian', seeking an ideal synthesis of European and Indian values lead to men integrating more into public life and professional spaces, while women remained constrained by traditional domestic roles. While men were increasingly socialised into liberal autonomous subjecthood, women remained excluded from this process, thus reinforcing gendered inequalities (see *ibid.*: 15). These colonial influences resulted in the formation of "colonial difference" (Mignolo 2002 as cited in Kumar 2023: 15), which defined the boundaries of knowledge and theory, asserting that meaningful thought and analysis were only possible where modern epistemology – encompassing philosophy, the social sciences, and the natural sciences – had been introduced. Conversely, indigenous modes of knowledge, encompassing folklore, magic, and traditional wisdom, were dismissed as non-rational and excluded from legitimate intellectual discourse. This also led to the imposition of European gender norms, while local gender systems were either erased or redefined through a European patriarchal lens⁶ (see Kumar 2023: 15f).

Thus, it can be argued that the evolution of patriarchal ideology has been influenced by Hindu religious doctrines, which emphasise strong hierarchical relations based on gender (male supremacy), caste, and seniority (see Ghimire et al. 2015: 320), but also by colonial and modernisation processes, such as European epistemology, education, capitalism, and (neo-)liberalism (see Kumar 2023: 15f). This historical evolution demonstrates that while South Asia

⁶ For further reading: CHATTERJEE, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

has a fluid and complex understanding of gender, patriarchal structures have persisted and adapted, continuing to shape women's agency, and societal roles today.

To explore patriarchy on a micro-level, as well as the ways in which heteronormativity shapes everyday life in the region, the following sections examine the role of family and marriage in South Asia, with a particular focus on India, with insights that can be applied to the context of Nepal. This is of particular significance given the central role that family and marriage play in the lives of the present study's participants. Only few studies focused on Nepal were found. Therefore, the following draws primarily on research from India, as its insights can be applied to the Nepali context.

1.3.1 From Gender Roles to Marriage: The Intersection of Family, Tradition, and Change in South Asia

Cultural perspectives on family and society vary significantly around the world. The Global North is often characterised by an emphasis of individualism, while Asia, Africa, Latin America and parts of Europe tend to prioritise collectivism, and communal interdependence (see Chadda, Deb 2013: 300).

In South Asia, family and marriage are closely interwoven with gender roles, societal expectations, and religious traditions. Despite the cultural diversity of the region, traditional joint families remain the predominant familial structure. These extended family systems typically house multiple generations under one roof, emphasising collective identity, unity and loyalty over individuality and personal space, while sharing responsibilities and resources. The family is highly valued in (South) Asian cultures, promoting a strong sense of interdependence and cooperation among its members. The family also serves as the primary institution for the transmission of cultural values across generations (see Chadda, Deb 2013: 300f). Asian, particularly Indian, families are frequently characterised as traditional joint families, typically comprising three or more generations under one roof. Joint families are known for their stability and resilience, exerting significant influence on their members' lives. In structure, they evolve gradually, with new members (wives and their children) entering the household as older generations pass away. Although matrilocal and matriarchal family structures exist in certain regions, daughters usually depart the familial home after marriage. This practice, influenced by patriarchal values, reduces their autonomy and reinforces male dominance within the household. Women who upon marriage, join their husband's household are expected to conform to existing family expectations rather than assert independence. Women are expected to prioritise caregiving responsibilities, while men are expected to be the primary financial

providers. Sons typically take responsibility for elderly parents who are no longer able to work, thereby taking a leading role within the family (see *ibid.*: 301). In the subsequent chapter, the profound significance of marriage in Indian and thus also in Nepali culture is explored, as well as the strict maintenance of hierarchical authority, that upholds familial cooperation.

The socio-cultural landscape of India has undergone significant transformations, particularly since the country's mid- 20th century independence. Shifts in economic, political and gender dynamics have had a direct impact on familial norms and structures. A notable transition is evident as traditional joint families are progressively being replaced by urban nuclear families, a phenomenon attributable to the migration of younger generations for educational and employment opportunities (see Mullatti 1995: 18). However, as Rakesh Chadda and Koushik Deb (2013) emphasise, "it would be wrong to look at present Indian families in such simple bimodal groups" (see *ibid.*: 301). The diversity of contemporary family systems is marked by varied structures, patterns, role relationships, obligations, and values. For instance, some joint families opt for a separate kitchen and finances, to achieve greater autonomy while maintaining familial bonds, reflecting a transition towards more flexible family arrangements. In contrast, other families may reside in separate locations while maintaining close ties within the same community (see *ibid.*). Consequently, while traditional family structures continue to exert influence, it is imperative to recognise the diversity and complexity of Indian families today.

A similar transformation has been observed in Nepal in recent decades. Since the mid-1970s, the country has made significant progress in formal education, wage labour, government services, infrastructure, and mass media. These changes have led to a reorganisation of daily social life and an influx of new ideas and values within the lifetime of Nepal's current population (see Hoelter et al. 2004: 1132). Much like in India, these shifts have affected family structures, with a growing move away from traditional extended households towards nuclear family models, particularly in urban areas. This is discussed more in detail in a later chapter.

Nevertheless, deeply ingrained cultural values continue to shape family life, reinforcing collectivist ideals, even as societal norms evolve. The family unit is regarded as a foundational anchor and cornerstone of Hindu societies, with multiple generations collectively sharing responsibilities. Respect for elders, communal childcare and a strong sense of familial honour remain central tenets. From an early age, individuals are socialised to prioritise family obligations, often through lived examples of love, sacrifice, and devotion within the family structure. These values, deeply rooted in Hindu religious traditions, persist even as modernisation reshapes societal norms by adapting to contemporary realities while maintaining core principles (see Chekki 1996: 412; Mullatti 1995: 24). Within the familial sphere, gender

roles are rigidly defined, shaping individuals' personal freedoms and life trajectories. Men are expected to be breadwinners, taking responsibility for the financial well-being of a family unit, and are more likely to be part of the public life, while women are assigned the role of caregivers, responsible for household duties, child-rearing, and maintaining family honour (see Chadda, Deb 2013: 301). This division of labour is not confined to the household: Women in Nepal often face restrictions that limit their access to life opportunities and exclude them from decision-making on crucial matters that directly affect their lives (see Dahal et al. 2022: 2)⁷. These structural inequalities, firmly entrenched in patriarchal traditions, serve to reinforce male dominance and limit women's autonomy, despite the gradual shifts brought about by modernisation and education.

This socio-cultural context exerts considerable pressure on individuals, particularly those who do not conform to the heteronormative structure of South Asian societies, including PoMSOGIESC+ individuals in Nepal. The failure to meet these expectations can result in further marginalisation, such as familial and social exclusion.

1.3.2 Marriage as a Social Institution: Duty, Honour, and Gendered Expectations

In South Asia, marriage is not merely a union between two individuals; rather it is a contract between two families, deeply embedded in religious, social, and institutional frameworks (see Allendorf, Ghimire 2013: 60; Hoelter et al. 2004: 1132). In Hindu traditions, marriage is regarded as a sacrament rather than a personal choice, fulfilling both religious duties and ensuring the continuation of family lineage. It is regarded as an essential rite of passage, as outlined in sacred Hindu texts, where the bond between spouses is considered secondary to the bond between families. Similarly, in Islamic traditions, marriage is regarded as a contractual agreement in which families play a crucial role in selecting a suitable partner. Across diverse religious communities, marriage is expected to be a lifelong commitment, with individual desires taking a subordinate role to familial and societal obligations (see Allendorf, Ghimire 2013: 60f; Chekki 1996: 410; Mullatti 1995: 18, 23). That is why marriages are often arranged. The Hindu doctrine of *pativrata* further reinforces these structures by emphasising a wife's unwavering devotion to her husband, supporting the idea that marriage is predestined and cannot be dissolved. This doctrine upholds strong hierarchical relationships within marriage, where men hold authority over women and seniority dictates power dynamics within the family.

⁷ For further reading: ATTERAYA, Madhu S/GNAWALI, Shreejana/SONG, In Han. 2015. Factors associated with Intimate Partner Violence against Married Women in Nepal, in *Journal of interpersonal violence* 30 (7). 1226-1246.

LAMICHHANE, Prabhat/PURI, Mahesh/TAMANG, Jyotsna/DULAL, Bishnu. 2011. Women's Status and Violence against Young Married Women in Rural Nepal, in *BMC Women's Health* 11 (19): 1-9.

This patriarchal structure serves to reinforce the idea that marriage is not only a personal milestone, but also a mechanism for sustaining social order. Marriage is thus considered obligatory and sacramental, with an overarching expectation that women devote their lives to serving their husbands and raising children (see Allendorf, Ghimire 2013: 60f).

Although love marriages and personal choice in partner selection have become more common in recent years, arranged marriages remain the norm, primarily because they uphold family honour, social cohesion, and economic security. Even when individuals do select their own partners, parental approval is often indispensable, reflecting the continued dominance of familial authority over personal relationships (see Mullatti 1995: 16ff, 23f).

In the context of this master's thesis, the burden of societal and familial expectations weighs especially heavy on GBQ individuals, whose sexual identities and desires deviate from the heteronormative ideal of marriage. They may be pressured into heterosexual union to maintain family reputation. Furthermore, the emphasis on procreation – particularly the preference of male offspring – further reinforces heteronormative expectations and marginalises non-heterosexual relationships within traditional family structures (see Allendorf, Ghimire 2013: 3f; Oli, Onta 2012: 198f; UNDP, USAID 2014: 43ff).

1.3.3 Marriage and Family in Nepal: The Influence of Hinduism and Social Change

In Nepal, the influence of Hinduism, that has historically shaped social and familial norms, persists even though many Nepalese ethnic groups did not adhere to Hindu principles for centuries. Although Hinduism was originally linked to high-caste Indo-Aryan communities, its principles spread across various regions in South Asia, also to Nepal, thus many communities incorporated its practices and customs. In many regions of South Asia, Hindu ideologies remain deeply influential, even among non-Indo-Aryan communities. This process is known as *Sanskritization*. Consequently, Hindu principles regarding marriage, gender roles, and societal and family hierarchy became deeply ingrained, shaping patriarchal norms and expectations across Nepalese society (see Allendorf, Ghimire 2013: 60f; Ghimire et al. 2015: 320).

In contrast to India, Nepal was never colonised, which has resulted in comparatively limited exposure to European ideas regarding gender, marriage, and individual autonomy until the mid-20th century. Whereas in India, British colonial rule introduced alternative perspectives on love-based marriages, gender equality, and personal independence. Nepal remained quite isolated from these influences until the 1950s, when Nepal's king opened the country to interaction with

non-Hindu nations (see Hoelter et al. 2004: 1132). At that time, most Nepalese people were living in accordance with traditional gender and marital norms (see Ghimire et al. 2015: 320). Since the mid-20th century, though, Nepal has experienced major social and economic changes, driven chiefly by factors such as education, urbanisation, wage labour, mass media, and globalisation. Increased interactions with non-Asian cultures, international migration, and tourism have introduced novel ideas about gender roles, relationships, and marriage. The exposure to foreign cultures led to ideological shifts. This has resulted in an expansion of individual choice in marriage, with rising numbers of love marriages, inter-caste unions, and even divorces (see Allendorf, Ghimire 2013: 60f; Ghimire et al. 2015: 320).

The interplay of Hindu traditions and contemporary influences give rise to a multifaceted marital landscape in Nepal. While social norms continue to reinforce patriarchy, arranged marriages, and familial obligations, modern influences are reshaping these expectations. Education has been identified as an essential factor in promoting independence among younger people and encouraging the adoption of novel values. This shift has been observed to be characterised by a detachment from traditional Hindu principles, such as patriarchy and traditional gender norms, towards more liberal ideals of independence, equality, and relationships based on mutual consent (see Ghimire et al. 2015: 322).

As younger generations find themselves negotiating the tension between long-standing traditions and the emerging ideals of autonomy, equality, and self-expression, the discourse around family expectations and marriage continues to evolve. PoMSOGIESC+ individuals find themselves at a crossroad, having to balance between societal pressures and personal aspirations while seeking acceptance within their families and communities. This ongoing transformation highlights the progress made and the obstacles that remain in redefining marriage, relationships, and gender norms in Nepal.

1.4 Current Status of Research

Currently, there is limited research regarding GBQ individuals in Nepal negotiating societal, in particular familial expectations with their interpersonal necessities. Nevertheless, there is a number of scholarly literatures, surveys and reports by (non-)governmental, humanitarian organisations in English that have addressed LGBTQIA+ related topics in South Asia, mainly in India in Nepal. Most studies regarding Nepal however have a broader lens focusing on PoMSOGIESC+ advocacy and rights, while individuals and their lived experiences fall out of the research's scopes. A selection of the relevant studies touching on related topics is presented in the following.

Identity Formation and the Process of Coming Out

In India, research on the psychological and social experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals remains limited, as Meghna Achar and Baiju Gopal (2023) argue. One early contribution to this field is Ketki Ranade's seminal study "Growing Up Gay In Urban India: A Critical Psychosocial Perspective" (2018) that explores the sexual identity development of LGBTQ individuals in Pune and Mumbai during the 1980s and 1990s. Ranade collected narratives of people with same-sex preferences and contrasted their sexual identity development with those of heterosexual individuals (see *ibid.*).

The complex and context-dependent nature of sexual identity formation is further elaborated in the multi-site study "Perspective on Sexual Identity Formation, Identity Practices, and Identity Transitions Among Men Who Have Sex With Men in India" (2018) by Cecilia Tomori et al. Drawing on data from 363 participants across 15 locations, the study highlights the diversity of sexual identity formation among MSM⁸. The study's findings indicate that those individuals with more gender-nonconforming traits often face greater levels of familial and societal rejection, violence, marginalisation and vulnerability to HIV infection (see *ibid.*).

A more recent study by Achar and Gopal "Coming out of the desi closet: disclosure of same-sex sexuality in metropolitan-India" (2023) focuses on the narratives of ten young adults (ages 18-25) from metropolitan India who have homosexual desires. The study identifies themes influencing the decision to come out: There are three restraint factors which "reduce the probability of coming out and these are – an incessant pressure to conceal, perceived lack of stability and support, and anticipated disintegration of long-standing familial tradition" (*ibid.*: 160). Two propulsion factors which act as the driving force for coming out include approachability of the disclosure target and parental validation. The scholars underscore the complex psychosocial negotiations involved in coming out in the Indian context of their study (see *ibid.*). This research held particular relevance for my research, as my project in Nepal pursued similar objectives. Accordingly, I drew on aspects of Achar and Gopal's methodological approach, and their interview questions served as reference point in the development of my own interview guide.

Complementing these empirical contributions, a literature review by Swapnajeet Sahoo et al., "'Coming out'/self-disclosure in LGBTQ+ adolescents and youth: International and Indian scenario – A narrative review of published studies in the last decade (2012-2022)", (2023) provides a comprehensive synthesis of 23 studies, focusing on the process of coming out among LGBTQIA+ adolescents and youth. While all but one of the reviewed studies were conducted

⁸ Men having sex with men.

in countries of the Global North, the authors emphasised the culturally situated nature of disclosure in collectivist societies such as India, focusing on the above-mentioned study by Achar and Gopal (2023). Their findings suggest that coming out is a complex, multi-step process influenced by a range of psychosocial factors, including parental and societal support, cultural and traditional values and experiences of stigma and discrimination. Notably, the review underscores the scarcity of research on LGBTQIA+ youth in the Indian contexts, with a mere one of the 23 studies concentrating on India (see Sahoo et al. 2023).

Expanding the lens on LGBTQIA+ experiences beyond disclosure, Brian Horton (2018) presents an ethnographic study of queer individuals in Mumbai who strategically choose silence over coming out as an active way of navigating their lives, especially within family relationships. Rather than viewing kinship and queerness as inherently opposed in the Indian context, Horton shows how queer people may inhabit heterosexual kinship networks through a combination of resistance and compliance. In this context, silence/non-disclosure is not seen as repression or victimhood, but as a deliberate and meaningful strategy for balancing desires for respectability and queer selfhood (see *ibid.*).

Discrimination, Stigma, and Structural Marginalisation

While the Indian studies mentioned above focussed primarily on urban, metropolitan contexts, research from Nepal offers important insights into broader structural and intersectional challenges.

Natalia Oli and Sharad Onta's qualitative study about "Self-perception of Stigma and Discrimination among Men Having Sex with Men" (2012) investigates the self-perception of stigma and discrimination among MSM in Kathmandu Valley. The study, which was based on focus group discussions, revealed widespread discrimination from family members, employers, health care providers, and law enforcement. Despite the observation of a decline in stigma due to heightened awareness of homosexuality by some respondents, the overall situation in Nepal remains one of systemic exclusion (see *ibid.*).

Also, noteworthy mentioning is a report by Mitini Nepal and Outright International titled "Our Lives, Our Stories: LGBTI Seniors in Nepal" (2023) that foregrounds the voices of older LGBTI individuals in Nepal. The collection of stories highlights intersectional discrimination and lifelong experiences of marginalisation, including housing instability, economic disparity, forced child marriages, family violence and denial of senior citizen state benefits. Yet, it also documents narratives of resilience, older LGBTI relationships, contributions to society and the aspirations of LGBTI elders for future generations (see Sharma, Gurung 2023).

At the policy and structural level, several comprehensive reports offer data-driven insights into the conditions of sexual and gender minorities in Nepal. The UNDP, the Williams Institute and BDSNs' report "Surveying Nepal's Sexual and Gender Minorities: An inclusive Approach" (2014) provides a detailed overview of the demographics, socio-economic conditions, experiences of stigma and discrimination, and access to HIV related services among Nepal's sexual and gender minorities. Developed in consultation with Nepali activists and adapted from existing population studies, the survey not only highlights the complex realities faced by sexual and gender minorities but also underscores the need for inclusive research methodologies. Furthermore, the study highlights how data on the experiences of sexual and gender minorities can inform and guide policy, planning and interventions (see *ibid.*).

Another report by UNDP and USAID with support from UNICEF "Being LGBT in Asia: Nepal Country Report" (2014) reviews the legal and social environment for LGBT individuals and organisations in Nepal. The report is based on the Nepal National LGBTI Community Dialogue, which was held in Kathmandu in 2014 and brought together 57 activists from diverse backgrounds, along with government representatives, human rights institutions, and international development partners. The report provides a comprehensive overview of human rights issues affecting LGBTI individuals, spanning areas such as education, employment, health, media, political participation, family life, and religious and cultural dynamics. The objectives of the report are to build a foundation of knowledge regarding the lived experiences of LGBTI individuals, strengthen regional networks, assess the capacity of LGBTI organisations to engage in policy and advocacy, promote the inherent human rights of LGBTI people as well as shed light on stigma and discrimination they face. It also provides guidance for LGBTI inclusive development efforts by UNDP, the broader UN system, USAID, the US Government, and other development partners, using research along with social and multimedia tools (see *ibid.*).

Also pertinent to mention is Kyle Knight's case study "Bridges to Justice: Case Study of LGBTI Rights in Nepal" (2015) which documents the legal, political and social progress of LGBTI rights in Nepal from 1990-2015. Knight illustrates how strategic litigation, activism, and international advocacy were leveraged to advance LGBTI rights, while also noting that structural discrimination and gaps in implementation continue to hinder full equality (see *ibid.*). Although a considerable body of research on the LGBTI community in South Asia already exists, I argue that significant gaps remain – particularly in regard to localised, ethnographic understandings of queer lives in Nepal. This research project therefore aimed to contribute to this field by examining the lived experiences and challenges of LGBTI individuals in

Kathmandu Valley, with particular attention to cultural, societal, and familial dynamics that shape their everyday realities.

1.5 Problem Statement, Research Questions and Research Aim

As previously discussed, societal structures profoundly shape people's lives in Nepal, with the family occupying a central role within these structures and social interactions often revolve around the family unit. Given that the majority of Nepal's population practices Hinduism, marriage is traditionally viewed as a sacramental and obligatory institution that extends beyond the individual, reinforcing patriarchal lineage and carrying deep religious and social significance. These values have for a long period of time shaped marital relationships, emphasising hierarchical gender relations. While several scholars have noted the gradual transformation of rigid Hindu family structures over the past century – such as the rise in individual choice in marriage, inter-caste unions, delayed marriages, and increasing divorce rates (see Ahearn 2004; Ghimire et al. 2006; Niraula 1994) – heteronormative, and patriarchal values still prevail today. In this close-knit society, kinship and collectivism are paramount. The perception and reputation – such as 'saving face' – therefore plays a crucial role. For parents of PoMSOGIESC+ children, the fear of societal condemnation and the potential loss of face can overshadow individual freedom. Family honour is often prioritised over personal well-being, therefore PoMSOGIESC+ individuals can feel compelled to conceal their sexual orientation and gender identity, given their divergence from dominant heteronormative structures. Despite political recognition and legal advancements for Nepal's PoMSOGIESC+ community, family pressure and societal expectations continue to exert strong influence over the development and expression of PoMSOGIESC+ identities.

In this master's thesis, I investigate how GBQ individuals move within these societal expectations, with a focus on the family. The study explores how participants individually confront, negotiate, and manage these dominant norms in their everyday lives. Particularly, my research questions are as follows, categorised into three subject areas that can build upon one another:

1. What are the societal and family norms in which the GBQ individuals operate? How are those norms perceived by GBQ individuals? Is there discrimination within the society and family and if so, in what form? What is the level of heterosexism and discrimination within Nepalese society and to what extent is the self-realisation of GBQ individuals dependent on it?

2. How do GBQ individuals in Nepal construct their sexual identities within intersecting social, cultural and relational contexts? How do GBQ individuals navigate in social spaces (family, school/university, workplace) that are characterised by a tension between heteronormative values on the one hand and the need for expressing gender and sexual orientation on the other? Do GBQ individuals express sexual identity through e.g. their interactions, outward appearance, etc. in family/society?
3. Do GBQ individuals come out and if so, when, to whom and how? How do discrimination/heterosexism/societal and familial values influence their decisions to come out or not?

The objective of this research endeavour was to gain insight into the lived realities and challenges faced by GBQ individuals in Nepal, particularly in Kathmandu Valley, with an attention to analysing the social and familial dynamics that shape their lives. The central inquiry of this study is an examination of the extent to which heteronormative values and societal expectations – both in the broader social context and within the family – affect the lives of GBQ individuals. Furthermore, I explore whether and how GBQ individuals were able to openly express their sexual identity within these structures. To investigate these profoundly personal questions, I adopted an ethnographic research approach, as it allows for a broader understanding of the social and cultural meanings attached to individual experiences through direct participation, observation, interviews, and informal conversations⁹.

⁹ For a more detailed elaboration of my research design, see chapter 3.1.

2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that serves as an analytical tool for my collected data. I drew upon Queer Theory, beginning with an exploration of its origins and turning to Michel Foucault's "The History of Sexuality" Vol. 1 (1976, HoSVol1), highlighting its relevance to Queer Theory. This is followed by a discussion on heteronormativity and heterosexism. Key concepts such as Doing Gender (see West, Zimmerman 1987) and Gender Performativity (see Butler 1988) are also examined to deepen the theoretical framework. Despite the argument among scholars that Queer Theory is not or only partially applicable to South Asian context due to its origins in the Global North, which is culturally very different in comparison (see Dutoya 2022; Gopinath 2005; Kumar 2023; Mitra Channa 2013; Raj Rao 2017; Shahani 2011), I still consider certain approaches to be relevant. The concepts mentioned above can be applied to Nepal, as they shape societal and familial structures in which the participants of this study move and thus influence their lives.

Furthermore, I examine acts of coming out of the closet. Such processes have long been central to LGBTQIA+ development, particularly in European/US American contexts, where it is often framed as a necessary step toward self-acceptance and social visibility. Coming out is commonly associated with personal liberation and authenticity. However, it is important to recognise that this model does not always align with non-European/US American cultural realities, where identity is shaped by different familial, social, cultural, and religious structures. Scholars (e.g. Achar, Gopal 2023; Horton 2018; Huang, Browser 2018; Jhang 2018; Tamagawa 2018) have thus challenged the universality of the Eurocentric coming out model, proposing alternative frameworks that better reflect the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in diverse cultural settings. These concepts – 'coming in', 'coming home' and 'coming with' – are also discussed.

2.1 Queer Theory

„In a world in which normative gender and heterosexuality are often still preconditions for social recognition as a person, the methods of queer theory are first and foremost methods of survival” (Owen 2020: 1).

This statement captures the political urgency and transformative potential of Queer Theory, which challenges the ways in which power structures shape identity, desire, and social belonging. Furthermore, inspired by Butler (1988, 1990 [1999]), Queer Theory questions conventional understandings of gender and sexuality. It highlights the fluid and performative

nature of these categories, suggesting that they are socially constructed rather than fixed or natural (see chapter 2.1.3).

The term Queer Theory was first introduced by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990 as a placeholder for what the author described as “another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual” (ibid. 1991: vi). Emerging in the early 1990s in the USA, Queer Theory developed within the broader context of feminist debates, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and anti-racist, sexual, and gender-political movements – both within and outside academia. Rather than forming a unified theory, it encompasses diverse and sometimes conflicting approaches that critically examine the intersection of sexuality, gender, culture, and society through an identity- and power-critical lens (see Laufenberg 2019: 331f).

Ian Morland and Annabelle Willox further highlighted this complexity by interrogating the term ‘queer’ itself, challenging its conventional meanings and fluidity. They explored the multifaceted nature, questioning whether queer functions as an identity, an action, or a political strategy, emphasising its contested and evolving character (see Morland, Willox 2017: 1). Prior to its adoption within academic discourse, the term ‘queer’ was reclaimed by activists who had previously experienced it as a homophobic and transphobic slur (see Laufenberg 2019: 332). As Laufenberg (2019) noted, queer activism in the USA was shaped by individuals who confronting marginalisation not only in mainstream society but also within the lesbian and gay rights movement. In this sense, queer became a term of empowerment for those who refused to conform to normative understandings of gender and sexuality, positioning it as both a mode of resistance and a means of self-definition (see ibid.: 332).

Queer Theory critically examines the relationship between biological sex, social gender, and sexuality within the context of hegemonic power structures and socio-political discourses. This critical framework challenges the assumption that normative binaries, fixed identities, and heterosexuality are the default. Instead, it exposes and destabilises the systems that define and regulate gender and sexuality while centring identities that exist beyond these constraints. Additionally, Queer Theory critiques the prevailing sexual order, emphasising e.g., how lesbian and gay politics frequently emerge in spaces that remain undertheorized or constrained by unrecognised heteronormative assumptions. Rather than providing tools for meaningful analysis, conventional social theories often reinforce these norms, making them inadequate for understanding queer experiences. Furthermore, the rise of queer activism has introduced new forms of politics that remain largely misunderstood outside queer circles, thereby emphasising the need for theoretical approaches that extend beyond conventional frameworks (see Warner 1991: 6).

Queer Theory interrogates heterosexuality and rigid binary gender structures as cultural constructs and social relations. It does not merely theorise non-normative sexualities and genders but also examines their regulation and resistance within capitalist and nation-state contexts, as well as in relation to transnational and (neo-)colonial dynamics. Sexual and gendered categories are rarely considered in isolation; instead, they are understood in relation to other hierarchical differences such as ethnicity, class, and dis/ability. Rather than thriving for a singular definition, Queer Theory embraces its polyvocal nature, making it a dynamic field of study that both operates within and disrupts Gender Studies (see Laufenberg 2019: 331f).

As a historically and culturally situated concept, Queer Theory emerged as a response to the gay and lesbian civil rights movements, feminist debates surrounding sexuality, and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s (see Laufenberg 2019: 332; Morland, Willox 2017: 2). However, over time, its radical origins have been juxtaposed with its commercialisation, as seen in the television series “Queer as Folk” (2000-2005), which rebranded queerness as a fashionable, consumerist identity. This tension – between Queer Theory as a radical critique and its appropriation within mainstream culture – reflects broader debates about its meaning and purpose (see Morland, Willox 2017: 1ff).

A significant foundational text for Queer Theory is Michel Foucault’s seminal *HoSVol1*. It lays groundwork for theories that can be applied to the research context of this study. Foucault examined how power operates through discourse to shape societal understandings of gender and sexuality, highlighting the ways in which norms are produced and maintained. His work also provided the groundwork for understanding heteronormativity, a concept that describes the societal expectation that heterosexuality is the default and natural orientation. Both ideas are discussed more in detail in the following subchapters.

Building on these foundations, scholars in the field have investigated the social construction and regulation of not only sexuality but also gender itself. They argued that gender and sexual identity are not fixed traits but rather are continuously created and maintained through social actions. Theories such as *Doing Gender* and *Gender Performativity* explore how gender is reinforced, negotiated, and, at times, subverted in everyday life. Ultimately, Queer Theory does not merely study marginalised identities; it critically interrogates the very frameworks that construct and regulate them, offering a lens through which to rethink power, identity, and resistance.

2.1.1 Michel Foucault's History of Sexuality and its Relevance to Queer Theory

"The History of Sexuality is not a history of sexuality" (Taylor 2017: 9).

Rather than providing a chronological account of sexual practices, Michel Foucault's seminal work examines the ways in which knowledge about sex has been historically constructed. As its French subtitle "*La volonté de savoir*" (the Will to Know) suggests HoSVol1 explores how the desire to understand sex emerged and why it happened to be seen as essential knowledge. Foucault traced the emergence of discourses and practices designed to regulate and understand sexuality, demonstrating how the sciences of sex were invented and how they came to shape notions of selfhood and happiness (see Taylor 2017: 9).

Prior to an examination of the content and significance of HoSVol1 in relation to Queer Theory, it is imperative to first comprehend the context in which it was written, and the intellectual trajectory that led to its development. Foucault's early reluctance to engage with the topic of sexuality during his 1951 *agrégation de philosophie* (a national philosophy examination in France) is indicative of the intellectual climate of the time. At this stage, Foucault's primary scholarly interests were focused on Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger, and he perceived sexuality as a topic lacking the philosophical rigour expected in academic discourse. Furthermore, his personal experience as a young man in a homophobic society, where homosexuality was subjected to psychiatric scrutiny, may have influenced his aversion to discussing the topic in an institutional setting. Nevertheless, this early encounter foreshadowed the critical inquiries he would later investigate in HoSVol1 (see Taylor 2017: 1ff).

Foucault's shift towards writing about sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s can be understood in terms of his broader intellectual concern, particularly the way discourses on sexuality are intertwined with power and knowledge. In HoSVol1, Foucault challenged the prevailing notion that European and North American societies had long repressed sexuality and were only recently 'liberating' it. Instead, he argued that modern societies have obsessively discussed, classified, and regulated sexuality, embedding it within power structures. He raised critical questions regarding the centrality of sex to identity, its elevation to a subject of academic and institutional discourse, and the effects this had on individuals and society. One of the most significant arguments in HoSVol1 is that "sex became a crucial target of power" (Foucault 1978: 147). Foucault argued that the increasing discourse on sexuality is not a sign of freedom but rather a means of social control – what he termed "bio-power" (ibid.: 140). This form of power emerged in the 19th century, aimed to regulate populations through discourses on health, reproduction, and norms around sexuality. Foucault linked this to historical anxieties about racial degeneration, class hierarchy, and eugenics, showing how sexuality became a focal point

for governing bodies to manage and discipline its people (see *ibid.*: 140-150). Thus, rather than viewing his intellectual trajectory as a simple personal transformation from repression to liberation, it is more accurate to understand it as a deepening of his critique of how power operates. His personal frustration in 1951 – possibly stemming from being compelled to discuss sexuality – echoes the fundamental tension in *HoSVoll*, which argues that our discourse on sexuality is shaped by forces that construct our roles as subjects within broader systems of control (see Taylor 2017: 3-8).

Foucault's work was foundational for Queer Theory because it reframed sexuality not as a natural given that power merely suppresses but as a historical construct (see Taylor 2017: 73ff; Spargo 1999: 11ff). His critique challenges the notion of sexuality, instead presenting it as a phenomenon shaped by historical and social forces. This shift in paradigm profoundly influenced the development of queer theoretical approaches, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and historically grounded understanding of sexuality (see Laufenberg 2019: 335f; Marchia, Sommer 2019: 269f).

In *HoSVoll*, Foucault also examined the normalisation of heterosexuality as the dominant sexual orientation in society, demonstrating how non-heteronormative sexualities, such as homosexuality, were systematically stigmatised (see Marchia, Sommer 2019: 269). Queer theorists have built on this, demonstrating how heteronormativity is deeply embedded in social structures and operates as a norm that shapes every aspect of life, constructing non-heterosexual identities as deviations (see Laufenberg 2019: 335). The normalisation of heterosexuality and its implications for queer identities are explored in more detail in the subchapter 2.1.2.

Within Queer Theory, numerous scholars have built upon and continue to build upon Foucault's work. For instance, David Halperin employed Foucault's theories in his work "Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography" (1995) to contend that queer politics – unlike mainstream gay rights movements – challenge essentialist perspectives on homosexuality. Instead, queer politics embrace the idea of identity as fluid and contingent. Halperin emphasised that in a heterosexist society, the focus on homosexuality is less about personal pleasure and more about the regulation of knowledge, thereby highlighting the power dynamics involved. This perspective aligns with Foucault's theories on confession and the politics of visibility, showing how power functions through discourse rather than mere repression. For this reason, Halperin referred to Foucault as the „patron saint“ (Taylor 2017: 141) of queer activism, crediting him with both a critique of power and a strategy for resistance that continues to shape Queer Theory and activism (see Halperin 1995; Taylor 2017: 194-200).

Another key figure in Queer Theory, Judith Butler, extended Foucault's insights on power and discourse to gender. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988) and "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" (1990 [1999]), Butler's theory of Gender Performativity built on Foucault's argument that identities are shaped through repeated social norms rather than reflecting an inherent truth. Just as Foucault demonstrated that sexuality is a social construct, Butler argued that gender is not a biological fact but is instead shaped by social, historical and cultural influences (see Butler 1999). Within Foucault's theoretical framework, Queer Theory challenges the notion that categories such as 'gay', 'straight', 'male' and 'female' are fixed or universal truths. Instead, it posits that these identity markers are socially constructed, maintained, and regulated through discourse, norms, and power relations (see Taylor 2017: 176-182).

Ladelle McWhorter interprets HoSVol1 as deeply resonant for queer readers, revealing how normalisation and surveillance shape and constrain queer lives. In "Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization" (1999) McWhorter adopted a personal approach, interweaving her own journey of self-discovery as a lesbian with a broader discussion of Foucault's theories on power and sexuality. Rather than focusing solely on Foucault's arguments, McWhorter emphasised their transformative potential, showing that individuals need not to conform to rigid, socially recognised sexual identities. Her work challenged fixed norms and identities, advocating for a more personal and ethical approach to sexuality (see Taylor 2017; 66f, 183-195; McWhorter 1999).

In essence, Foucault's work is foundational for Queer Theory because it moves beyond identity politics, instead interrogating the intricate relationship between power, knowledge, and the construction of sexuality. These are not merely sites of regulation but also of resistance. An observation which was also made in the context of Nepal (see chapter 4.3.3: '*Coming In*': *Acceptance, Embracement, Empowerment* and 4.4).

2.1.2 Heterosexuality as the Norm

„Heteronormativity means (...) that heterosexuality *is* the norm – in culture, in society, in politics. Heteronormativity points out the *expectation* of heterosexuality as it is written into our world. It does not (...) mean that everyone is straight. (...) Heteronormativity emphasizes the extent to which everyone, straight or queer, will be judged, measured, probed, and evaluated from the perspective of heterosexual norm. It means that *everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight*” (Chambers 2003: 26).

Heteronormativity, a term frequently employed within LGBTQIA+ academic discourse, signifies the social and cultural enforcement of heterosexuality as the prevailing and anticipated norm (see Chambers 2003: 25f). In numerous societies – including Nepal where my research participants reside – heteronormativity manifests in societal expectations of heterosexual marriage and traditional gender roles. Cisgender, heterosexual relationships between men and women are regarded as the only legitimate form of intimacy and social recognition. Heterosexism further reinforces these structures by assuming that everyone is heterosexual and positioning heterosexuality as natural, ideal, and normative standard, positioning any deviation from it as inferior. As defined by Georgy Herek (1995), heterosexism is “the ideological system that denies, denigrates [sic!] and stigmatises any nonheterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship, or community” (see *ibid.*: 321). Heterosexism as societal assumption manifests in subtle ways during everyday interactions and more overtly through exclusion, discrimination, or violence, resulting in the systemic marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ individuals. It establishes the conditions for homophobia by asserting that the world is and must be heterosexual, systematically upholding power and privilege for heterosexuals through institutions and social structures. This creates an environment, where non-heterosexual identities are marginalised, and homophobia can thrive (see Pharr 1993: 2; Pharr 2000 as cited in Kjaran, Jóhannesson 2013: 352f). As Suzanne Pharr (2000) argued, heterosexism manifests in both overt and subtle ways within these institutions, operating through four key mechanisms: The unquestioned dominance of heterosexual values, the normalisation of heterosexual privilege, the institutionalised display of homophobia, and the enforcement of Compulsory Heterosexuality. The embedding of these structures into social and cultural systems, heterosexism and homophobia work together to sustain the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ individuals and reinforce heterosexuality as the default (see Pharr 2000 as cited in Kjaran, Jóhannesson 2013: 353).

Heterosexism is defined as the social and cultural dominance of heterosexuality, while heteronormativity is the social norm that establishes heterosexuality as the expected social

order. The marginalisation of non-heterosexual identities is achieved through social and institutional discrimination, while heteronormativity is the social norm that establishes heterosexuality as the default. The concept of heteronormativity itself gained traction in 1991 when Michael Warner framed it in the *Social Text* special issue “Fear of a Queer Planet”. He highlighted how heteronormativity structures social life by marginalising non-heterosexual identities. The term was also coined by Steven Seidman in the same year. It is asserted that Warner and Seidman were also two primary contributors to the establishment of Queer Theory (see Marchia, Sommer 2017: 269, 274; Warner 1991).

To comprehend the genesis of the theoretical concept of heteronormativity, it is imperative to engage with the seminal contributions of key scholars who have critically examined heterosexuality as the prevailing norm. The intellectual roots of this concept can be traced back to HoSVOll in which he addressed the historical construction of sexuality and the normalisation of heterosexuality. Foucault argued that sexuality is socially constituted, with heterosexuality being produced as the norm through its opposition to homosexuality, which is marked as deviant (see Taylor 2017: 181). While Foucault’s primary focus was on heterosexism, he did not extensively address gender or its specific role in maintaining heterosexual dominance (see Marchia, Sommer 2017: 273). Following the seminal work of Foucault, scholars such as Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin have critically analysed the mechanisms through which heterosexuality is entrenched as the prevailing social norm. Their contributions have established theoretical foundations for contemporary discourse on heteronormativity. Rich introduced the concept of Compulsory Heterosexuality in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980 [2003]), in which she argued that heterosexuality is not merely a personal orientation, but a system imposed on women through patriarchal norms. Rich positioned the lesbian experience as an intersection of various forms of discrimination and social marginalisation, demonstrating how heterosexuality is intricately intertwined with gendered socialisation and the subjugation of women (see Marchia, Sommer 2017: 273; Rich 2003). Butler further advanced the discussion in “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity” (1990 [1999]) by deconstructing gender and sexuality, the categories of male/female and heterosexual/non-heterosexual. She argued that patriarchy not only enforces heterosexuality as the norm but also constructs gender itself, shaping the very framework through which identities are understood and policed (see Butler 1999; Marchia, Sommer 2017: 273). Another key scholar, Gayle Rubin, explored – in her essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Critical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (1984 [1999]) – the intersection of gender and sexuality and how “they intersect as social manifestations of patriarchal oppression”

(Marchia, Sommer 2017: 273). While she did not deconstruct gender and sexuality as Butler did, she analysed how both are policed under patriarchal systems, reinforcing heteronormativity as part of a broader social hierarchy (see Marchia, Sommer 2017: 273; Rubin 1999).

As previously stated, the term heteronormativity was initially coined by Warner and Seidman in 1991. Following HoSVol1, Warner and Seidman, alongside others, began exploring the impact of normativity, imbued with power, on queer individuals (see Marchia, Sommer 2017: 273). They “tend to draw directly on Foucault’s understanding of sexuality, and leave gender out of the debate entirely. Like Foucault, Warner and Seidman consider heterosexuality as the focal point of normative sexuality in order to understand how those of different sexualities are oppressed” (Marchia, Sommer 2017: 274). In Warner’s “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet” (1991), a critique is articulated concerning the pervasive and often imperceptible nature of heteronormativity within the realms of social theory and politics. He argued that much of leftist and social thought has either ignored or marginalised issues of sexuality, reinforcing heterosexuality as the default norm. Even when sexuality was considered, it was typically framed in ways that uphold heterosexuality as the standard (see *ibid.*: 3f). Warner highlighted how queer politics has moved beyond seeking mere tolerance or inclusion, instead challenging the structural dominance of heterosexual norms across institutions, culture, and ideology (see *ibid.*: 11-14, 15f). He asserted that heteronormativity is deeply embedded in institutions such as the family, law, and economy. Warner’s critique focused on how social structures assume heterosexual reproduction as the basis of social continuity, thus reinforcing the exclusion and marginalisation of queer identities (see *ibid.*: 6-9). His argument posited that the concept of queerness challenges not only legal discrimination but also the fundamental structure of society as it pertains to gender and sexuality. He underscored the imperative to perceive queer struggles not as a matter of minority concern but as pivotal to the process of reimagining the social order (see *ibid.*: 6-9, 11-14). Warner’s critique in “Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory” (1993) laid the groundwork for Queer Theory as a significant tool for interrogating established normative assumptions. He called for a radical rethinking of social structures to move beyond restrictive norms and advocated for a more inclusive understanding of identity and power. Notably, Warner’s introduction of the term heteronormativity provided a lasting framework for analysing the deeply embedded forces that continue to shape society until today. Building on this foundation, many scholars have expanded the concept of heteronormativity to incorporate gender and other intersecting factors, leading to a variety of interpretations. For instance, Rosemary Hennessey (1993) used the term ‘heteronormativity’ to describe how gay and lesbian individuals assimilate into gendered stereotypes (see *ibid.*: 964f; Marchia, Sommer

2017: 276). In contrast, she argued, embracing queerness can be seen as an act of defiance against societal pressures to remain invisible or conform apologetically. This audacious and unapologetic refusal of heteronormativity challenges the status quo, asserting visibility as a form of resistance (see Hennessey 1993: 967).

Samuel Chambers re-established heteronormativity as a framework for understanding societal constraints imposed by the normalisation of heterosexuality, arguing that heteronormativity does not simply mean that everyone is assumed to be straight; rather, it highlights how heterosexuality is positioned as the default, while all other sexualities are treated as deviations. This normative structure exerts a profound influence on social, cultural, and political expectations, ensuring that both heterosexual and queer individuals are constantly evaluated through the lens of heterosexual norms (see Chambers 2003: 26; Marchia, Sommer 2017: 276). Until today, two major perspectives on heteronormativity have come to the fore. One perspective views heteronormativity as a system of sexual oppression, marginalising non-heterosexual identities as unnatural or deviant. The second perspective, as elucidated in Feminist Studies, interprets heteronormativity as a process of oppression that intersects with gender, emphasising the intertwining of heterosexual privilege with the socialisation of men and women. In this view, heteronormativity is deeply linked to the construction of idealised femininity and hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing both heterosexuality and cisnormativity as societal standards. More recent discussions position heteronormativity within broader systems of oppression, acknowledging its intersections with ethnicity, class, and other forms of structural inequality. Consequently, heteronormativity is nowadays understood not just as a constraint on sexual identities but as a pervasive force shaping social norms, power dynamics, and cultural expectations at multiple levels (see Marchia, Sommer 2017: 276f, 282).

2.1.3 Doing Gender, Gender Performativity

The foundation of the Doing Gender and Gender Performance theories can be traced back to the sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967), whose ethnomethodological approach argues that gender roles and identities are not biologically predetermined but are instead constructed through habitual and often unconscious social practices. This standpoint represents a significant departure from the biological concept of gender, which is often referred to as ‘sex’ and refers to physical characteristics. In contrast, Garfinkel’s ethnomethodological approach posits that gender is actively created through bodily routines and repeated actions, or ‘doing’. In his work “Studies in Ethnomethodology” (1967), Garfinkel, particularly through the case study of Agnes, illustrated how gender identity and roles are socially constructed rather than naturally given. Agnes, a transwoman, must actively work to be recognised as a ‘normal, natural’ woman,

constantly adjusting to social expectations and managing gendered markers to be perceived as female. Garfinkel described this process as ‘passing’ – the social necessity of actively producing and maintaining a gender identity. Garfinkel emphasised that Agnes’ existence as a woman is not simply a matter of biology, but rather a continuous performance of femininity to evade detection and social sanctions. This suggests that gender identity is not a fixed biological fact, but rather a socially constructed and interactively sustained reality (see *ibid.*: 116-185).

The scholars West and Zimmerman developed the theory of Doing Gender (1987) that challenges the traditional understanding of gender as a fixed biologically determined characteristic. Influenced by ethnomethodology, their approach views gender not as something one ‘has’ but rather as something one ‘does’ – an ongoing, interactive social practice. Instead of perceiving gender as an innate identity or a stable role acquired through socialisation, the Doing Gender approach highlights the active creation and performance of gender through everyday behaviours, shaped by societal expectations (see *ibid.*: 126f).

West and Zimmerman introduced a key distinction between ‘sex’ (a biological classification), ‘sex category’ (a socially assigned classification based on external markers) and ‘gender’ (the performative enactment of behaviours that align with societal norms for one’s sex category). West and Zimmerman argued that gender is not an internal or stable trait, but rather a dynamic process of social interaction, whereby individuals must continuously display behaviours that enable observers to categorise them as male and female. This ongoing performance of gender is not merely personal but is embedded in institutional structures that regulate and reinforce norms (see *ibid.*: 127, 131-135).

Drawing on comparative cultural studies (e.g. Mead 1963, 1968), the Doing Gender approach highlights the inconsistency of gender categories across societies and critiques simplistic notions that assume universal, biologically determined differences between men and women (see West, Zimmerman 1987: 148). Instead, gender emerges in social interactions, where individuals are held accountable for enacting behaviours deemed appropriate for their assigned sex category. Failure to conform to these expectations can lead to social sanctions (see *ibid.*: 139f). West and Zimmermann suggested that the process of Doing Gender serves to legitimate existing power structures, thereby reinforcing inequality by rendering gender differences appear ‘natural’. In areas such as household labour and the workplace, gendered expectations shape roles and limit individual agency. Given the pervasive nature of sex categorisation in society, gender performance is nearly unavoidable. Therefore, meaningful social change requires the disruption of everyday practices that uphold gender distinctions, thereby making visible the ways in which gender is actively constructed and sustained (see *ibid.*: 143-147).

The interplay between *Doing Gender* and *Compulsory Heterosexuality* – introduced by Rich in 1980 – can be seen in the way that social forces pressure individuals into heterosexual relationships, presenting them as the default and natural way of being (see *ibid.* 2003: 13-17). Heterosexuality is reinforced by clear, socially accepted markers of gender, such as appearance, dress, and behaviour, which are imposed on individuals to ensure that they are perceived as properly gendered (see West, Zimmerman 1987: 144f).

Butler's theoretical standpoint aligns with West and Zimmerman's theory. Although her theories are predominantly associated with Gender and Feminist Studies, they are highly pertinent to Queer Theory. In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988) Butler adopted a performative approach to the concept of gender, asserting that gender is not an innate identity or a static, pre-existing entity. Instead, Butler contended that gender is a social construct, shaped by historical and cultural discourses, particularly those that reinforce heterosexuality. Drawing on the concepts of phenomenology and performance theory, Butler proposed a theory that challenges the conventional understanding of gender roles. Butler suggested that individuals enact gender roles in ways that align with societal expectations. However, these performances are not entirely voluntary nor imposed but rather are embedded within cultural norms that shape and regulate behaviour. The repetitive nature of these gender performances creates the illusion of a natural or essential identity, yet in reality, gender only exists to the extent that it is performed. Deviations from expected gender performances challenge the stability of these norms and reveal gender as a socially constructed fiction rather than an inherent truth (see *ibid.*: 524-528). Butler expanded on this approach in her work "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" (1990 [1999]), in which she meticulously examines the challenges (trouble) that arise from the attribution and reproduction of gender relations (see *ibid.*). Butler critically interrogates and seeks to deconstruct the notion that the concept 'man' is exclusively linked to the male body, while 'woman' is defined solely in relation to female bodies (see *ibid.* 1999: 10). Consequently, gender-specific attributions and roles inevitably follow in societies that function within this binary framework (see chapter 1.3). This aspect is particularly relevant to the present project, as it demonstrates how rigid gender binaries shape social expectations.

West and Zimmerman's *Doing Gender* and Butler's *Gender Performativity* converge in seeing gender as an ongoing social practice rather than a fixed characteristic. Both argue that gender is enacted through repeated behaviours that are shaped by social norms, reinforcing power structures and heteronormativity. While West and Zimmerman emphasised everyday interactions, Butler highlighted the cultural regulation and historical construction of these

performances, showing that gender is not innate but a socially maintained illusion. In Queer Theory, these insights are employed to challenge binary gender orders, emphasise the fluidity of gender, and facilitate an understanding of how heteronormative, binary gender relations are maintained and how they can be destabilised and transformed.

2.2 The Act of Coming Out of the Closet

The evolving nature of family structures in South Asia, with traditional joint families gradually shifting toward more autonomous arrangements, has not diminished the deep-rooted influence of traditional family values. These values, embedded in a patriarchal and heteronormative framework, shape expectations regarding gender roles, marriage, and social propriety. Within such spaces, LGBTQIA+ individuals must navigate complex realities as they develop their gender and sexual identity, often grappling with the question of how open they can be about their authentic selves.

The phenomenon of ‘coming out of the closet’, in short ‘coming out’, is relatively new in South Asia. The term ‘coming out’ describes the process of recognising one’s gender and sexual orientation to oneself and others (see Bowling et al. 2019: 358). Originated in the coded language of early queer communities in the US, the metaphor of ‘coming out of the closet’ emerged in response to the necessity of secrecy for survival. Originally, ‘coming out’ referred to a debutante-style introduction into queer social circles rather than a public declaration of identity. Over time, particularly in the mid-20th century, the phrase underwent a shift in meaning, becoming synonymous with the revelation of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity to a heteronormative society. The metaphorical ‘closet’ is representative of the constraints imposed by societal expectations, shame, and fear, while ‘coming out’ is symbolic of liberation and authenticity. This transformation in meaning reflects the shift from private, community-based acknowledgement to a broader political act of visibility and resistance against oppression (see Saguy 2020).

However, in many contexts, including South Asia, coming out remains a fraught process. The prevalence of societal taboos has led to many LGBTQIA+ individuals opting not to come out, driven by concerns regarding discrimination, social alienation, and familial rejection (see Achar, Gopal 2023: 162, 172). Despite rising LGBTQIA+ awareness globally, the level of societal understanding and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities remain limited, and deep-seated challenges persist (see Sahoo et al. 2023: 1021f). Therefore, the decision to remain closeted continues to be a prevalent norm among LGBTQIA+ individuals, serving as a form of self-preservation in an environment where visibility can lead to both scrutiny and exclusion.

The process of coming out can be conceptualised not merely as a public declaration, but rather as a continuous psychological journey that is intricately intertwined with the development of an individual's sexual identity. It is a gradual process beginning with self-recognition and culminating in the integration of a queer identity (see Achar Gopal 2023: 161; Rosenberg 2018: 1788f).

For many, coming out is a deeply personal and psychologically significant experience. Particularly within the family sphere, this process is often perceived as a major hurdle to overcome (see Bhattacharya 2014: 110; Heatherington, Lavner 2008: 329). In South Asia, families, whether immediate or extended, are often cited as significant sources of violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals. This violence, rooted in gender-based discrimination, intersects with factors such as socioeconomic class, conservative family values, and the dominance of male family members in patriarchal societies. Resistance from family members often begins when relatives become aware of nonconforming sexual orientations or gender identities. In the initial phase, many parents attempt to conceal their child's identity due to concerns regarding social stigma and disgrace. In subsequent stages, parents and other family members may resort to mental and/or physical violence in an attempt to exert control over their perceived disobedient children or to 'cure' them of their non-heterosexuality. These violent measures can include psychological manipulation, othering within the family and community, denial of gender and/or sexual orientation, emotional blackmail, separation from same-sex partners, medical interventions, coerced heterosexual marriages, confinement, deprivation of basic necessities, physical assault, and even sexual violence perpetrated by family members (see Bhattacharya 2014: 110).

Given these risks, research findings indicate that parents frequently are the last to be informed. In a seminal study by Anthony D'Augelli and Scott Hershberger (1993), 194 gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents were asked, to whom they had first disclosed their sexual identity. The study revealed that 73% of the participants had first disclosed their sexual identity to a friend, while only 7% initially had told their mothers, 3% their siblings and just 1% their fathers (see *ibid.*: 429ff). Pizza Chow and Sheung-Tak Cheng (2010) also observed that lesbians frequently disclose their sexual orientation to friends before telling family members due to the stigma and shame associated with homosexuality. This reluctance can result in significant mental distress and a desire to avoid familial disclosure altogether (see Chow, Cheng 2010; Perrin-Wallqvist, Lindblom 2015: 468f).

According to Laurie Heatherington and Justin Lavner (2008), disclosing one's sexual identity to family members is often perceived as an obstacle due to fears of negative consequences. In

their article “Coming to Terms with Coming Out: Review and Recommendations for Family Systems-Focused Research”, in which they reviewed various coming out scenarios from previous studies conducted worldwide, they stated that parental reactions vary widely, ranging from withdrawal of support to full acceptance (see Heatherington, Lavner 2008: 329, 331f; Perrin-Wallqvist, Lindblom 2015: 468). The process of coming out has been shown to have a significant impact on individuals’ well-being, often resulting in a range of psychological distress (see Willoughby et al. 2006: 15f). Prior to coming out, individuals frequently experience a sense of alienation, insecurity, shame, nervousness, and discomfort, often stemming from uncertainty regarding how others will react. However, positive responses to the act of coming out, particularly from parents, have been shown to contribute further to self-acceptance, relief, pride, and even liberation, contributing to a healthy and confident LGBTQIA+ identity. Conversely, negative reactions have been shown to result in diminished self-esteem, and engagement in high-risk behaviours (see Achar, Gopal 2023: 162; D’Augelli, Hershberger 1993: 435ff; Perrin-Wallqvist, Lindblom 2015: 469, 478).

2.2.1 LGBTQIA+ Identity Development

The process of coming out is widely recognised by scholars as a crucial milestone in the identity formation of LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially during adolescence (see Cass 1984, 1996; Heatherington, Lavner 2008; Rivers 2002; Willoughby et al. 2006). It is therefore often mentioned in various LGBTQIA+ identity development theories. According to Vivienne Cass (1984, 1996), the development of an individual’s homosexual identity can be conceptualised as a progression through distinct stages, commencing with the initial recognition or awareness of self as ‘different’ and culminating in the complete integration of a queer identity (see Cass 1984, 1996; Willoughby et al. 2006: 14f).

D’Augelli (1994a, 1994b) proposed a social constructionist model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity development – the so called ‘Life-span Identity’ model – emphasising that identity is not fixed but continuously negotiated throughout an individual’s life. The model outlines six interconnected phases that LGB individuals may traverse non-linearly (see D’Augelli 1994a, 1994b; Goodrich, Brammer 2019: 152f).

The initial phase, entitled ‘exiting a heterosexual identity’, entails the rejection of a presumed heterosexual identity and the adoption of a new self-label, such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This is followed by initial processes of informing others about one’s LGB identity – a process often referred to as ‘coming out’. The second phase is the development of a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity status. This stage focuses on cultivating what D’Augelli (1994a) described as a “sense of personal socio-affectional stability that effectively summarises thoughts, feelings, and

desires” (ibid.: 325). Social interactions with other LGB individuals are central to this process, through which one can learn, reflect, and shape their understanding of what it means to live as LGB. In the third phase ‘developing a LGB social identity’, individuals establish affirming support networks that enable them to openly express their sexual orientation and receive enduring social validation and support. Phase four ‘becoming a LGB offspring’, pertains to the process of disclosing one’s sexual orientation to their parents. Phase five is ‘developing a LGB intimacy status’ and the sixth and final phase is the process of ‘entering the LGB community’ that involves the engagement with broader queer communities, often through political and social action aimed at challenging dominant social structures and changing social barriers (see D’Augelli 1994a: 319; Goodrich, Brammer 2019: 152f).

Notwithstanding its emphasis of flexibility, critiques of D’Augelli’s model posit that it still retains linear elements and fails to fully account for identities beyond lesbians, gays, bisexuals and binary frameworks, such as transgender and non-binary individuals. Additionally, the model lacks an intersectional perspective and does not adequately address the influence of external factors, including safety, minority stress and cultural contexts, which play crucial roles in shaping identities (see Goodrich, Brammer 2019: 157-168). For instance, transgender individuals frequently experience navigating both gender and sexual identity within societal frameworks that impose rigid expectations (see Stieglitz 2010 as cited in Rosenberg 2018: 1790).

Susan Jones and Marylu McEwen (2000) conceptualised identity within a broader social framework, emphasising its complexity and its multiple dimensions. Their approach considers social identity as shaped by various intersecting factors, including ethnicity, gender, class, culture, and sexual orientation, all of which contribute to an individual’s identity formation. Consequently, they posited that identity is fluid and dynamic, evolving in response to social and contextual influences (see Jones, McEwen 2000; Perrin-Wallqvist, Lindblom 2015: 468).

Shoshana Rosenberg (2018) also has a more fluid, multidimensional, and anti-linear understanding of queer identity development, which she framed as “the sexual self-discovery journeys of young, LGBT+/queer people” (ibid.: 1788). She argued that many interpretations of queer sexualities are limited by homonormativity¹⁰, which imposes rigid expectations on queer experiences. In particular, she critiqued earlier coming out frameworks for following a

¹⁰ Rosenberg employed the term ‘homonormativity’ to denote a framework that perceives LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships as inherently analogous to heterosexual ones, with the only distinguishing factor being the gender of the individuals involved. This viewpoint, she contended, simplifies and homogenises LGBTQIA+ experiences, neglecting to consider the multifaceted manner in which queer individuals navigate their identities (see Rosenberg 2018: 1788).

linear trajectory from repression to social disclosure and full self-acceptance, asserting that these models are shaped by homonormative assumptions and fail to reflect the complexity of queer self-discovery which is shaped by a range of personal, social, and structural influences. Rosenberg's hermeneutic thematic analysis of interviews with eight LGBTQ+ individuals in Western Australia identified key themes in the process of sexual self-discovery and identity development. One theme, 'searching for identity', explores the age at which individuals first experience queer desires (see *ibid.*: 1796ff). Another theme, 'society, stigma and self', examines the external messages participants received about homosexuality and queerness. It also underscores the interplay between social stigma, the internal processing of stigma, and personal circumstances in shaping their early navigation of sexuality (see *ibid.*: 1798-1801). The theme of 'sexual self-discovery' denotes the realisation and acknowledgement of one's desires (see *ibid.*: 1801-1804). Finally, 'coming in' signifies the process of embracing one's sexuality and achieving a sense of inner congruence (see *ibid.*: 1804ff). Participants in Rosenberg's study described experiences of internalised homophobia, struggles with societal stigma, difficulties in finding a supportive community, and the non-linear nature of understanding and affirming their sexual identities. Notably, Rosenberg highlighted that queer individuals often navigate these experiences internally before, or sometimes instead of, making them socially visible (see *ibid.*: 1798-1806).

Rosenberg's conceptualisation of 'coming in' as an alternative to the conventional coming out narratives places emphasis on self-acceptance rather than external disclosure as the key phase of the development of a queer identity. This framework challenges the prevailing notion that public acknowledgement signifies the culminating step in identity formation, instead emphasising continuous internal reconciliation and self-recognition. By shifting the focus from external validation, coming in provides a more flexible and inclusive approach that acknowledges the diverse and evolving experiences of queer individuals. Notably, it acknowledges those who may never fully disclose their identities due to safety concerns, cultural expectations, or personal choice, thus offering a more nuanced and realistic understanding of queer identity development (see *ibid.*: 1804-1808).

2.2.2 Cultural Variations in Coming Out: The 'Coming With' Model

As already indicated in the previous sections, cultural aspects exert a considerable influence on the process of coming out. The coming out process is not merely a personal journey but also deeply embedded in cultural norms that shape individuals' experiences, emotions, and decisions before and after the disclosure. While certain reactions – such as acceptance, rejection, or ambivalence – are common across different contexts, the specific challenges LGBTQIA+

individuals face, as well as their coping mechanisms, are influenced by the cultural and societal environments in which they reside (see Achar, Gopal 2023: 163; Perrin-Wallqvist, Lindblom 2015: 472-478). The exploration of these culturally specific dimensions illuminates the manner in which societal norms, family structures, and historical legacies influence the ways in which LGBTQIA+ individuals navigate their identities across different regions and communities.

In collectivist societies such as Japan, China, and Taiwan, the process of coming out is distinct from that observed in individualistic cultures (see Jhang 2018; Tamagawa 2018). The models of coming out described in those countries reveal parallels to disclosure processes in Nepal.

For instance, the ‘coming with’ model in China emphasises the integration of familial and cultural identity with sexual identity, in contrast to the ‘coming out’ model which prioritises individuality, personal autonomy and public visibility (see Huang, Brouwer 2018). Huang and Brouwer distinguished between three distinct approaches to LGBTQIA+ identity in China: ‘Coming out’, ‘coming home’ and ‘coming with’. Coming out follows the Eurocentric notion of openly declaring one’s queer identity, centring individual visibility and self-expression. However, as discussed earlier, this can lead to familial conflict due to deeply rooted expectations of heteronormativity. By contrast, ‘coming home’ prioritises family harmony over explicit self-identification as queer. This approach involves the repression and concealment of queer desires, thereby preserving close ties with one’s family. This reinforces the notion that the simultaneous pursuit of a queer identity and the maintenance of familial bonds is not feasible (see *ibid.*: 98f).

The ‘coming with’ model presents an alternative framework that enables for the coexistence of a queer identity and belonging to a family without requiring a complete renunciation of or total submission to heteronormative structures. It allows LGBTQIA+ individuals to integrate their identities into family life through indirect or gradual strategies rather than open confrontation. These strategies may include the introduction of a same-sex partner as a ‘friend’ and gradually integrating them into family life, subtly challenging heteronormativity by bringing queer friends home, engaging in conversations about LGBTQIA+ issues, or encouraging parents to reconsider their biases (see *ibid.*: 107-110). Furthermore, some individuals engage in heteronormative rituals, such as weddings without legal registration to meet familial expectations while maintaining same-sex relationships in private. Others engage in *xinghun* (arranged marriages between gay men and lesbian women) as a means of navigating societal pressures while preserving their queer identities. Although *xinghun* may appear to be a complete capitulation to parental expectation, those who practice it often describe it as a way of safeguarding their non-heterosexual relationships. The arrangements allow for public

performance of a heterosexual marriage while creating a private space for queer relationships, thereby shielding the queer individuals involved from parental scrutiny (see *ibid.*: 107f).

While not overtly challenging heteronormative family structures, ‘coming with’ aligns both, familial belonging and queer identity. By neither fully rejecting nor completely conforming to heteronormative family expectations, ‘coming with’ challenges the binary opposition between sexuality and family. Instead, it positions the family as a site of negotiation and potential transformation rather than solely as a space of repression. This model acknowledges the complexities of a queer identity in China, offering a more differentiated approach that moves beyond Eurocentric coming out narratives and better reflects the lived experiences of Chinese queer individuals (see Huang, Brouwer 2018: 110f).

Wah-shan Chou and Edmond Coleman (2000) articulated a similar concept through their notion of ‘coming home’, proposed as a culturally specific alternative to coming out in the Asian context. While their framing of ‘coming home’ differs from that of Huang and Brouwer, it aligns more closely with their idea of ‘coming with’. Chou and Coleman’s approach emphasises the possibility of reconciling queerness with familial belonging, rather than positioning them as oppositional. In Confucian Singapore, gay men may ‘go home’ with their partners and present them as their friends, thereby enabling their families to infer the nature of the relationship without the need for direct declaration (see *ibid.*; Tamagawa 2018).

In essence, recognising the diversity of LGBTQIA+ identity experiences necessitates moving beyond rigid, universalised narratives of coming out. The coming out process is not a singular, linear experience, but a deeply personal, fluid, and multifaceted journey that extends beyond personality traits and includes various forms of disclosure – verbal, written, or through digital platforms – shaped by personal circumstances and cultural contexts. Given these complexities, culturally specific analyses are crucial to comprehensively grasp the varied coming out processes across diverse societal contexts (see Achar, Gopal 2023: 161ff). While Eurocentric narratives tend to emphasise visibility and self-expression, alternative models, such as ‘coming in’, ‘coming home’ or ‘coming with’, illustrate how individuals in collectivist-oriented societies navigate their identities while partly maintaining familial ties.

Rather than prescribing a singular path to queerness, it is essential to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways in which individuals affirm their identities. The process of sexual self-discovery and its disclosure remains inherently personal, influenced by both internal self-recognition and external social realities.

3 Research Strategy and Methodology

The following chapter provides a comprehensive account of the strategic approach adopted in my field research. It begins by outlining the design of the research project. This is followed by an examination of the methodology that has been employed and a detail account of my research process and ethics.

3.1 Research Design

This master thesis is based on three months of fieldwork conducted between June and September 2024 in Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. The research employed a qualitative ethnographic design to explore the lived experiences of GBQ individuals in Nepal. Given the international recognition of June as Pride Month, numerous PoMSOGIESC+ events were taking place during the same period. These events, organised by and for queer people, presented a valuable opportunity for me to engage in participant observation and establishing connections within the PoMSOGIESC+ community. This period was crucial for getting initial contacts and recruiting participants for my interviews. Prior visits to and residences in Nepal had facilitated connections with various Nepalese individuals and the queer feminist transcultural contemporary art association kaalo.101¹¹. In 2022 and 2023 I was employed at the Goethe Zentrum Kathmandu, a German language school that also promotes international cultural exchange by supporting cultural events and projects with various communities in Nepal¹². In 2022, I engaged in a project entitled ‘Songs of Revolution’, which constituted the inaugural Nepali queer poetry anthology. This experience provided an invaluable opportunity to interact with numerous individuals from the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Kathmandu Valley. I utilised these existing connections, along with all other pertinent contacts, to identify suitable participants during the course of my stay.

The identification of research participants was conducted through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling entails the initial selection of a small group of key contacts and/or participants who, through their social networks, subsequently refer additional individuals who fulfil the study’s eligibility criteria and possess the potential to offer valuable insights. The term *snowball sampling* is employed to draw a parallel with the concept of a snowball growing in size as it rolls downhill (see Morgan 2008: 816), like my participant pool that increased the further the research project progressed.

¹¹ <https://kaalo101.org/> (Accessed 23.11.2023) – kaalo.101 aims to offer a safe environment for artists, activists, and many more to exchange, create and collaborate.

¹² <https://www.goethe-kathmandu.edu.np/> (Accessed 26.11.2023)

All participants were member of the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Nepal. The majority of the participants – 9 out of 10 – lived, studied and/or worked in Kathmandu Valley. One participant resided in a more rural area in western Nepal. Among the participants, nine identified as individuals who perceived themselves as male, and one identified as female. Furthermore, eight participants identified as homosexual, one as bisexual, and one as queer, with the latter opting not to provide further details about their sexual orientation. The age of the participants ranged from 22 to 39 years. Nine out of ten participants belonged to higher castes and socially recognised ethnic groups, thus holding relatively privileged socio-economic positions in Nepalese society.

Table 1. Interviewee demographics

Name	Age	Occupation	Sexuality	Gender
Aahan	25	Drag Queen Performer, Tour Guide	Gay	Man
Ajit	26	Computer and Social Scientist, Governance Mentor, Queer Ambassador, Poet	Gay	Man
Anil	39	Social Worker, Freelancer	Gay	Man
Anush	30	Social Worker, Head of Rainbow Disability Nepal	Gay	Man
Bikram	38	Researcher, Humanitarian/Development Aid Worker	Gay	Man
Binod	25	Master Student of Gender, Sexuality and Women Studies	Queer	Man
Dhirendra	25	Artist, German Student, Art and Program Coordinator	Gay	Gender-fluid
Krishna	30+	Dentist	Gay	Man
Sabin	30+	Artist, Curator, University Lecturer	Gay	Man
Shreya	22	Bachelor Student of English Literature and Psychology, Board Member at YUWA	Bisexual	Woman

To safeguard the privacy of my research participants, pseudonyms and altered identifying details have been applied.

Over the course of several weeks, I conducted multiple in-depth dialogues and interviews with four participants. I refer to them as key participants. The interview process employed a combination of narrative and semi-structured interview methods. Furthermore, I gained direct insights into the participants' lived realities by accompanying them to their respective workplaces, spending leisure time with them, and meeting some of their friends. The remaining six participants were interviewed only once, with each interview following a semi-structured format. Each interview was recorded. A standardised interview protocol and transcription were meticulously prepared for each interview conducted.

The predominant language of communication was English. However, there were also instances of brief conversations being conducted in Nepali.

In order to establish collaborative and trusting relationships with my participants, the Participant-Centered Approach was adopted. This approach is explained in more detail below.

Participant-Centered Approach

The Participant-Centered Approach (PCA), as outlined by Marjorie McCrory and Victoria O'Donnell (2016), emphasises the role of the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative research. They contend that the process of data collection and generation is central in the construction of authentic accounts of lived experiences. This approach necessitates that researchers focus on establishing a 'working relationship' or rapport over a relatively brief period, given that the quality of this relationship directly influences the level of trust, reflection, and disclosure that participants feel at ease sharing. Consequently, these elements allow deeper, shared understandings to emerge, which are essential for producing valid and substantial qualitative research findings (see *ibid.*: 162f).

The PCA is primarily rooted in the field of therapeutic counselling and psychology, specifically in the person-centred therapy developed by Carl Rogers. Rogers introduced this framework to emphasise the significance of the quality of the interpersonal relationship in facilitating meaningful communication and therapeutic change. His ideas were initially applied to psychotherapy but later influenced other domains involving interpersonal relationships, such as social sciences. Rogers' ideas can be effectively adapted to qualitative research interviewing, where building trust and fostering a supportive relationship are crucial to understand participants' lived experiences (see McCrory, O'Donnell 2016: 163).

Carl Rogers' emphasis on "real interpersonal communication" (Rogers 1962 as cited in McCrory, O'Donnell 2016: 163) complements this framework, which asserts that the quality of the interpersonal encounter is the most significant factor in promoting effective communication and exploration. The importance of congruence, empathy, and positive regard in conducting open and authentic dialogues is highlighted. Congruence, otherwise termed genuineness, refers to the researcher's ability to maintain authenticity by ensuring that their verbal and non-verbal cues align. Empathy is defined as the ability of the researcher's capacity to understand the participant's world and communicate that understanding back to them. Positive regard, meanwhile, underscores the importance of accepting the participant's story without judgment, creating a space where they feel valued and respected (see *ibid.*: 163f).

In the context of qualitative research, McCrory and O'Donnell contend that these principles help researchers establish a collaborative relationship with participants, wherein the

participants' narratives, rather than the researcher's interjections or questions, guide the conversation. This approach can encourage participants to share their narratives in a manner that reflects their personal meanings and interpretations (see *ibid.*: 164). Aligned with this perspective, I sought to integrate elements of this approach into my research. The study's delicate nature demanded a high level of methodological rigour, as well as heightened awareness of ethical considerations and interpersonal dynamics. Many participants disclosed deeply personal experiences, such as coming out journeys and challenges with societal norms. Drawing inspiration from PCA for my research project proved instrumental in fostering the trust necessary for participants to feel secure in disclosing these intimate aspects of their lives.

3.2 Ethnographic Fieldwork

Aligned with my research interests, adopting a qualitative approach was a logical choice. As Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1996) emphasised, personal experiences are best investigated qualitatively, as they are in their essence. Qualitative research refers to any study that does not rely on statistical or quantifiable methods for analysis. Instead, it explores individual lives, personal narratives, behaviours and the intricacies of interpersonal relationships (see *ibid.*: 3f). As Stefan Thomas (2019) stated, ethnography as a method of qualitative research involves an exploratory journey into social worlds. This venture is characterised by both observational and intellectual engagement. The social world, which exists independently of the researcher, is a pre-existing reality. The aim of ethnography is to gain an understanding of the cultures in which people live their lives. This is achieved through direct encounters with people in social situations, which facilitates the uncovering of meaning of cultural worlds (see *ibid.*: 1).

As Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersly (2007) illustrated, the term ethnography emerged first in 19th century Euro-American anthropology, where it was used to denote detailed portrayals of communities or cultures outside of Europe and North America. It was distinguished from ethnology, which concentrated on the comparative and historical examination of societies. Ethnology was regarded as the foundational discipline of anthropology and frequently relied on accounts provided by travellers and missionaries. However, as anthropologists began conducting their own fieldwork, the term ethnography evolved to incorporate both empirical investigation and theoretical analysis of social organisations and cultures. By the early 20th century, ethnographic fieldwork had become a central methodology in anthropology, requiring researchers to live within communities for extended periods to document their ways of life, beliefs, and values. This immersion became a

defining characteristic of the discipline. Over time, ethnographic methods influenced other fields, such as sociology. The Chicago School of Sociology (1920s-1950s) adopted ethnographic approaches to study urban life, often referring to their work as case studies. In the latter half of the 20th century, ethnography became part of broader qualitative research movements while retaining its unique methodological features. The evolution of ethnography has been shaped by diverse theoretical frameworks, including Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism, Marxism, Feminism and Postmodernism. Despite the lack of single, standardised definition, ethnography remains a valuable and adaptable approach for understanding complex social phenomena (see *ibid.*: 1f).

In Atkinson's work "For Ethnography" (2014), the author set out to demonstrate the value of ethnography as a research method in social sciences. Ethnography reflects a deep commitment to comprehending the social worlds of others. It is an ethical grounded endeavour, founded upon respect for the everyday lives of those being studied. The humane nature of ethnography is contingent upon the ethnographer's personal dedication and the shared humanity between the researcher and the researched. Furthermore, ethnographic research is inherently social, as it necessitates active participation in the daily lives of people involved. Such profound engagement ensures fidelity to the social world under investigation and to the individuals who shape it. When conducted and analysed effectively, ethnography captures the complexity of these worlds and lives, tracing the contours of culture, social organisation, and patterns of meaning that render the world comprehensible. It examines the dimension of the everyday, delving into the language and communication of social actors, their accounts, and interactions, preserving the essence of their lived experiences (see *ibid.*: 3ff).

I conduct with this assertion, and this clearly explains my decision to align my fieldwork with the core principles of ethnographic research. As Lisa Given (2008) noted, "[f]ieldwork is the heart of the ethnographic research design" (*ibid.*: 289). Immersing oneself in the daily life of a community enables the researcher to gain a profound understanding of its social structure, values, and practices. The process of gaining acceptance within the community is complex and often necessitates a considerable investment of time, as well as a degree of negotiation and sensitivity to local expectations. Extended field engagement is crucial to build these relationships and ensure meaningful participation (see Macintyre 2018: 1). While ethnographic methods were employed, due to the constraints of time and resources during my research stay, it was not possible to undertake a full ethnography. I used methods such as participant observation, biographical-narrative interviews and semi-structured interviews in order to gather data. I kept a field diary during my research stay in the field.

3.2.1 Participant Observation

Since cultures are dynamic and do not hold still to be portrayed, as the American historian James Clifford (1986) once wrote, it is relevant for the researcher to become part of the studied field (see Clifford 1986 as cited in Wernhart, Zips 2014: 21). This approach ensures that researchers are not merely passive observers of the actions of the individuals under focus but also engage themselves as active participants to grasp the dynamics of the field. Thus, they form an intersubjective, dialogical relationship with the actors in the field and can experience their practices firsthand (see Wernhart, Zips: 20f). This is achieved using the method of participant observation, which originated from ethnographic fieldwork.

The Polish anthropologist and ethnologist Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (1884-1942) is widely regarded as the pioneer of participant observation, even though social scientists, including anthropologists, had conducted ethnographic fieldwork with aspects of participant observation prior to his time. He is credited with introducing a novel approach that emphasised long term stays in the field and active participation in the daily lives of its people. Malinowski's explanation of his approach remains a foundational reference for defining the method of participant observation (see DeWalt 2014: 252f):

“Soon after I had established myself in Omarkana, Trobriand Islands, I began to take part, in a way, in the village life, to look forward to the important or festive events, to take personal interest in the gossip and the development of the village occurrences; to wake up every morning to a new day, presenting itself to me more or less as it does to the natives. I would get out from under my mosquito net, to find around me the village life beginning to stir, or the people well advanced in their working day according to the hour or also the season, for they get up and begin their labors early or late, as work presses. As I went on my morning walk through the village, I could see intimate details of family life, of toilet, cooking, taking of meals; I could see the arrangements for the day's work, people starting on their errands, or groups of men and women busy at some manufacturing tasks. Quarrels, jokes, family scenes, events usually trivial, sometimes dramatic but always significant, form the atmosphere of my daily life, as well as theirs. It must be remembered that the natives saw me constantly every day, they ceased to be interested or alarmed, or made self-conscious by my presence, and I ceased to be a disturbing element in the tribal life which I was to study, altering my very approach, as always happens with newcomer to every savage community. In fact, as they knew that would thrust my nose into everything, even where a well-mannered native would not dream of intruding, they finished by regarding me as a part and parcel of their life, a necessary evil or nuisance, mitigated by donations of tobacco” (Malinowski 1961: 7f).

Malinowski's approach diverged from earlier fieldwork methods by placing greater emphasis on the everyday interactions and systematically documenting observations in chronological notes, rather than relying primarily on targeted inquiries into specific behaviours (see DeWalt 2014: 253).

Although Bronislaw Malinowski is widely acknowledged for the systematisation of this method, earlier instances of similar practices exist. Frank Hamilton Cushing (1857-1900) is widely regarded as one of the first anthropologists to engage in a prototype of participant observation during his extended fieldwork with the Zuni Pueblo in the southwestern United States in the late 19th century. Spending an extensive period of 4,5 years living among the Zuni, learning their language and participating in their social and religious practices, anticipated key aspects of later ethnographic methods, despite criticism for losing analytical distance and for 'going native'¹³ (see DeWalt, DeWalt 2011: 5f). Later in the 19th century, the method was further shaped by the British sociologist Beatrice Potter Webb (1858-1943). Webb adopted the technique of participant observation to study London's working class, employing disguised roles such as a rent collector and seamstress to interact closely with her research subjects, though her level of participation was limited (see Webb, Webb 1902 as cited in DeWalt, DeWalt 2011: 7).

Margaret Mead (1901-1978), an American anthropologist, also played a central role in shaping the method of participant observation. At approximately the same time that Malinowski was composing his book on the Trobriands, Mead independently developed a similar method. It is said that she may not have been familiar with Malinowski's seminal work "Argonauts of the Western Pacific" (1922), before her fieldwork in Samoa in 1925, where she studied adolescent girls and broader Manu'an social organisation. Her approach relied on observations from informal conversations, native language interactions, participation in social activities, such as etiquette, dancing, and crafting as well as learning skills required of Manu'an girls¹⁴. Mead combined the perspective of a novice with that of an ethnographer, offering an early and explicit interpretation of participant observation, even before the term was coined. Mead's focus was on understanding contemporary, living societies. In contrast to Malinowski's holistic approach, Mead utilised participant observation to address specific social issues, thereby demonstrating

¹³ Going native refers to the process whereby a researcher relinquishes their role as the investigator and instead becomes a fully integrated part within the cultural context under study. This transition is commonly associated with a diminution of the researcher's analytical interest and frequently results in the inability to publish the research findings (see DeWalt, DeWalt 2011: 21).

¹⁴ For further reading: MEAD, Margaret. 1928. *Coming of age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation*. New York: William Morrow & Co.

its adaptability for both comprehensive cultural studies and targeted research (see DeWalt, DeWalt 2011: 7f).

The term participant observation itself was formalised through Eduard Lindeman (1924), who emphasised its dual emic-etic perspective (see *ibid.*). By the 1940s, it had become a foundational method in anthropology and sociology, evolving to address contemporary contexts (see DeWalt, DeWalt 2011: 8).

As Barbara Kawulich (2005) noted, “[p]articipant observation is considered a staple in anthropological studies, especially in ethnographic research, and has been used as a data collection method for over a century” (*ibid.*: 3). This method integrates various techniques, where listening, conversing, questioning, observing, and collection targeted information all intersect, often involving all senses (see Beer 2020: 55). This method navigates a fine line between participation on one end and observation on the other. On one side, the researcher aims to build closeness, rapport, acting as a ‘normal’ participant and being accepted as a member within a social structure. On the other side lies the act of observation, which inherently implies a certain distance and objectivity. This approach necessitates the researcher’s engagement with the community while systematically recording their experiences (see Hauser-Schäublin 2020: 39). In order to conduct participant observation effectively, several skills are required. Researchers must achieve a balance between active engagement and reflective detachment, in addition to demonstrating adaptability and the ability to establish rapport and trust with participants. The method also demands patience and resilience, as building relationships and gaining access to meaningful experiences often take time. To gain insights into the community, it is challenging for the researcher to immerse themselves within it, whilst also maintaining the necessary detachment for critical analysis. The constant negotiation that characterises this process can lead to a state of tension between the researcher’s involvement and their distance from the community. Furthermore, the risk of ‘going native’ is a salient concern, as overly immersive integration into the community can comprise the analytical distance necessary for objective evaluation and writing about observation. In addition, the researcher normally establishes rapport and forms relationships with participants which can result to emotional entanglement, potentially biasing their interpretation of data (see DeWalt 2014).

Nevertheless, this approach is a valuable method for my research because it allows for a broader understanding of sociocultural practices by actively participating in and observing aspects of the subjects’ everyday lives, requiring language competence – I can speak, read, and write Nepali – and recording of observation in field notes (see Dewalt, Dewalt 2011: 1ff; Eramian 2018: 1).

Regarding my research project, it was difficult to find spaces to conduct participant observation, due to the absence of a clearly delineated or geographically centralised PoMSOGIESC+ community in Kathmandu Valley that posed a challenge in location initial points of contact. Individuals within the community mostly do not publicly appear as queer, a consequence of the heteronormative and patriarchal structures within Nepal's society. Consequently, my participation in community-specific events and private invitations from research participants to gatherings and leisure activities became critical entry points for conducting participant observation.

Attending queer-related events during Pride Month was particularly instrumental in the early stages of my fieldwork, providing opportunities to become visible within the PoMSOGIESC+ community, initiate contact with individuals, and gradually build acceptance and rapport through continued presence and participation. Attending these events, showing genuine interest, interacting with community members fostered trust and established relationships, facilitating integration into the community and allowing for the collection of rich observational data. These observations were systematically documented in the form of detailed field notes and structured observation protocols, which are included in the appendix.

3.2.2 Interviewing

In the course of my fieldwork, I have elected to employ interviews as the second method. The use of interviews as a research method is advantageous in facilitates direct communication with individuals from the PoMSOGIESC+ community, thereby fostering the establishment of trust. This approach has been proven effective in gaining profound insights into their realities and perspectives, while also allowing for targeted inquiries to gather additional in-depth information. The employment of interviews is of particular significance in the acquisition of candid and detailed responses, which serve to enhance the comprehension of ethnographic research. Specifically, I used lightly structured biographical narrative and semi-structured interviews. The former served to establish a narrative situation wherein I, as the researcher, initially took on the role of the listener. "The idea is to get people to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms, and at their own pace" (Bernard 2017: 164), which was particularly salient in light of the sensitivity of the research's topic. The use of biographical narrative interviews enabled the development of a part or the entire life story of a person (see Wengraf 2001: 111). Semi-structured interviews, guided by a predetermined set of questions, aimed to extract more specific information (see Bernard 2017: 164f).

In the event that, during conducting and analysing my lightly structured biographical narrative interviews, it became apparent that additional information was required, I re-contacted the

respective person and conducted a semi-structured interview to elicit the pertinent information that was missing, but relevant.

In each interview, I attempted to create an open and relaxed atmosphere, with the objective of encouraging casual conversations and facilitating mutual exchange. The selection of these interview methods was driven by the objective of ensuring that the informants felt comfortable and safe engaging in extensive conversations, without feeling pressured. Despite the incorporation of personal questions, I emphasised to each interviewee that answering was optional, allowing them to respond according to their comfort level and discretion.

Regarding my approach to conducting interviews and formulating questions, it is important to note that I was often quite direct in addressing certain topics rather than relying on indirect or implicit probing techniques to elicit information. I am aware that qualitative interviewing is typically concerned with the identification of intrinsic perspectives, behaviours, opinions, and motivations, which participants may not be fully conscious of, prior to interpreting them in the context of the research objectives. However, my priority was to establish a balanced dialogue between my participants and myself, ensuring that the hierarchical distinction between the researcher and the subjects of the research remained as minimal as possible. Consequently, a significant proportion of the questions posed were intentionally direct, focusing explicitly on my participants' opinions, positions, and perceived behaviours. This methodological decision was made with the dual objectives of encouraging the participants to articulate their thoughts in a coherent manner and providing them with a space to express themselves openly. Creating such spaces is important, given that many participants rarely have the opportunity to voice their opinions freely in broader societal contexts. Through our interviews, I aimed to offer them a platform where they felt heard, valued, and able to speak openly – something that is often denied to them in many aspects of their daily lives.

Biographical-narrative Interview

Language is the core in qualitative social research (see Küsters 2009: 19f), as it facilitates the contextualisation of individuals' subjective views on everyday experiences and their evaluations of historical contexts within a framework that acknowledges the structural implications for action (see Gingrich, Zips 2011: 14f). In essence, language functions as a medium for the articulation of social reality. The narrative interview method builds on this by aiming to faithfully preserve the interviewee's statements and expressions, reflecting their unique narrative (see Küsters 2009: 20). Rather than probing directly for specific events or actions, interviewees are encouraged to revisit past and present experiences, recounting memories in a spontaneous and detailed manner. The interviewer's role is to facilitate the

conversation by posing open-ended questions, thereby allowing the interviewee to assume the role of narrator. The interviewer's primary function is to listen and refrain from any form of interference. The interviewee commences with a broad question, thereby affording the interviewee the opportunity to share their narrative uninterrupted. Follow-up questions are only introduced once the interviewee has completed their initial narrative (see *ibid.*: 21f).

This technique aligns closely with the biographical-narrative interview, a method developed in the late 1970s by the German sociologist Fritz Schütze. Schütze's approach is founded on the premise that social reality is not something that 'exists' independently of the actions of society members but rather a construct of communicative interactions (see Küsters 2009: 18). Fritz Schütze delineated the development of the biographical-narrative interview as an important method in the realm of social science biographical research, underscoring numerous salient aspects. Primarily, he emphasised the significance of the process structures of the life course, which transcend individual fate and possess social pertinence. Schütze posited the notion that it was logical to identify fundamental forms of such structures, as they are present in all life courses. These forms characterise identity and the experience of biographical events, thus offering valuable insights into social dynamics (see Schütze 2016: 55f).

The biographical-narrative interview is designed to make such process structures visible. It comprises three central phases: First, there is an open-ended narrative prompt that encourages the interviewee to tell a coherent life story. This is followed by a phase of follow-up questions in which the researchers specifically address passages that have been abbreviated or omitted. Finally, the interviewee reflects on systematic connections and acts as an expert on their own life. This structured approach enables the generation of a substantial amount of primary data, encompassing external events, internal reactions and patterns of interpretation.

A significant advantage of the narrative interview is its ability to minimise the likelihood to deliberate or inadvertent manipulation by the narrator. Narratologists posit that the flow of a narrative is challenging for speakers to entirely control, rendering a rich source of authentic insights into their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. This notion supports the use of biographical narratives as a valuable material for exploring theoretical questions that extend beyond the confines of the narrative itself (see Wengraf 2011: 111, 114, 118).

Furthermore, the biographical-narrative interview transcends the conventional perspective of individuals as mere actors within society. Instead, it seeks to reconstruct life courses in ways that illuminate not only individual trajectories but also the historical events, social norms, and structural constraints that shape and influence them (see Wengraf 2011: 113).

The central aim to this method is to generate continuous data texts that depict the entanglement of social and biographical dynamics. The narratives should not only describe the external processes of life but also shed light on the internal processing of the individual. This combination makes it possible to analyse both the larger contexts of a life course and unconscious or repressed aspects. The combination of external life processes with internal, often unconscious, modes of processing facilitate an analysis of both larger social contexts and deeply personal dimensions (see Schütze 2016: 57f).

Biographical-narrative interviews were primarily used with key participants, whom I interviewed multiple times, as “[l]ife stories are usually recorded through a series of multiple interviews” (Schlehe 2020: 99). During the course of my field research, it became evident that some participants preferred direct, topic-related questions and were less receptive to open-ended prompts designed to elicit a biographical-narrative interview. In anticipation of such events, semi-structured interviews were conducted, with an interview guide being carried at all times. In some cases, the introductory narrative prompt I provided did not fully succeed in initiating a coherent narrative interview setting. Accordingly, I had to pose follow-up questions more frequently and guide the interviews more actively to obtain detailed biographical accounts. Thus, some of the interviews conducted for this research, which can be found in the appendix, are a combination of biographical-narrative and semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured Interview

In order to gather more targeted and detailed information from participants, semi-structured interviews were employed. This approach was particularly useful when only one opportunity to conduct an interview with a member of the PoMSOGIESC+ community was possible, as a guideline-based interview is recommended in such cases (see Schlehe 2020: 98).

Semi-structured interviews are characterised by a balance between standardisation and flexibility in interview methodology. As Tom Wengraf (2001) explained, semi-structured interview settings suggest “a certain degree of standardisation of interview questions, and a certain degree of openness of response by the interviewer” (ibid.: 62). While meticulous planning is essential, these interviews are only partially scripted, allowing for improvisation and subsequent inquiries in a thoughtful and theoretically informed manner (see ibid.: 3).

Semi-structured interviews involve a set of pre-prepared questions (see Wengraf 2001), for which an interview guide is a key tool. An interview guide provides a structured framework that aims to address the research topic whilst ensuring flexibility to accommodate contextual variations. In the case of a semi-structured interview, the interview guide comprises open-ended questions about overarching topics. Additional follow-up questions, intended to provide

clarification, are developed by the interviewer during the interview itself, thereby facilitating a natural flow of the conversation (see Adeoye-Olatunde, Olenik 2021: 1362). Michael Patton (2015) similarly emphasised that an interview guide outlines key topics and questions while giving the interviewer flexibility to adapt wording, probe deeper, and maintain a conversational style. This methodological approach ensures comprehensiveness while allowing for situational adjustments (see *ibid.*: 438f). As semi-structured interviews incorporate both open-ended and specific follow-up questions, it enables the participants to express their perspectives freely while yielding in-depth insights. During the interviews the questions are adapted as needed, integrating theoretical aims, clarifying responses, and incorporating significant points raised by participants, even if they deviated from the original structure of the interview guide (see Hopf 2002: 177).

Semi-structured interviews are more narrowly focused than biographical-narrative interviews (see Küsters 2009: 20), making them particularly suitable for participants I interviewed only once. For these interviews, I prepared an interview guide, which can be found in the appendix. However, during the interviews, I did not strictly adhere to the guide in terms of chronological order and content. Instead, I adapted my questions based on the flow of each conversation and the dynamics of each interpersonal interaction.

3.3 Analytical Approach: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

For the analysis of my collected interview material, I applied a detailed reflexive thematic analysis (TA), following the approach outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, 2013, 2022). Reflexive thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method for identifying themes and patterns within a dataset, particularly in relation to a specific research question. Reflexive TA is described as a method that systematically identifies, analyses, and interprets patterns or themes within the data. It enables researchers to organise and describe their dataset in rich detail (see *ibid.* 2006: 79). A clear research question or a set of research questions are essential to guide the analytical process through the various stages of TA (see *ibid.*: 49).

A defining characteristic of TA is its reflexive nature. As emphasised by Braun and Clarke (2022), reflexivity is of paramount importance in research, highlighting that a researcher's awareness of their own subjectivity and positionality is central to the process. Reflexivity, therefore, involves the critical reflection on the role of the researcher in the research process and the ways in which personal perspectives influence data interpretation. Reflexive TA aligns fully with qualitative research principles, ensuring the researcher's analytical choices are transparent and contextually grounded (see *ibid.*: 5).

There are multiple variations of reflexive thematic analysis, and the approach I adopted incorporated both inductive and deductive elements, as well as a constructionist perspective. An inductive approach is particularly useful when the objective is to explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and meanings. The inductive, reflexive TA commences with the dataset itself and identifies themes that emerge directly from the participants' narratives. While qualitative research is never purely inductive (due to the inevitable introduction of researchers' perspectives into the interpretation process), it aims to remain as close as possible to the participants' expressed experiences (see Braun, Clarke 2022: 56f).

In contradiction to the inductive approach, a deductive approach is guided by existing theoretical concepts as well as by the researcher's point of views, disciplinary standpoints and epistemology (see Braun, Clarke 2013: 177). This approach entails that the analysis is shaped by prior theoretical frameworks, which act as a lens for interpreting the data. In this approach, coding and theme development are influenced by predefined theoretical constructs that the researcher seeks to explore within the dataset (see *ibid.* 2022: 10, 56f).

Regardless of whether an analysis is more inductive or deductive – or a combination of both – theoretical frameworks play a crucial role. Theory provides the foundation for reflexive TA, ensuring both its depth and analytical power (see Braun, Clarke 2022: 57).

My analysis also incorporates a constructionist perspective, which examines how realities, meanings, and experiences are shaped by societal discourses (see Braun, Clarke 2006: 81). Constructionist TA focuses on how topics are framed and how individuals' narratives contribute to the social construction of reality. Rather than merely reporting participants' experiences, this approach critically interrogates how those experiences are produced within broader social and cultural contexts (see *ibid.* 2013: 177; 2022: 10).

Reflexive TA is a step-by-step process, with each phase of the analysis building upon the preceding one. Prior to commencing the coding of the collected data, I undertook an extensive engagement with the interview material to ensure familiarity with the data. Phase 1 'familiarisation with the data' involved meticulous reading of each interview, accompanied by taking notes on emergent patterns, noteworthy points, and the potential meanings underlying specific statements. The process of familiarisation with the data demands two seemingly opposing yet complementary approaches: Engaging with the data both intimately and critically to move beyond simply seeing it as raw information. In addition to this, a reflective mindset was fostered – one that involved continually examining how the data related to the broader themes and addresses the study's research questions (see Braun, Clarke 2022: 35, 44, 48).

In Phase 2 ‘coding’, I systematically worked through my dataset and identified segments that were particularly relevant in relation to my research questions. More precisely, I expanded on my initial notes for each transcription, carefully rereading every transcript to categorise the participants’ statements into coherent codes. In reflexive TA, codes are the smallest analytical units, and they serve as the foundation for latter theme development. In order to maintain flexibility for the subsequent theme-building process, codes should be both, precise and specific. The coding process involved two main coding techniques: Semantic coding, which captures explicit meanings that closely reflect the words of the participants, and latent coding, which identifies deeper, more abstract meanings underlying the data. Coding is not just about summarising, but about actively interpreting data. Codes form the building blocks of TA. Each code I built was assigned a code label, which is a general category under which specific codes are grouped. These labels generally function as a shorthand for the broader concepts underpinning the study. The coding process, therefore, involves interpretation and meaning-making shaped significantly by my subjectivity (see Braun, Clarke 2022: 35f, 52, 54f, 58ff).

Following the completion of the coding process, in phase 3 ‘generating initial themes’, I grouped the related codes and code labels into broader patterns of meaning, representing potential core ideas or concepts that might contribute to answering my research questions. These groups were labelled as themes. All coded data relevant to each potential theme was then sorted together in Excel-based lists for further analysis. In phase 4 ‘developing and reviewing themes’, I critically examined the identified themes to ascertain their accuracy in representing the dataset. This process involved carefully checking the themes against the original data to ensure that the most significant patterns were captured. I refined each theme to ensure coherence, cogency, and clarity. Revisions were made where necessary, with some themes being merged, split, or discarded. In addition, I examined the relationship between themes, considering how they related to broader theoretical frameworks relevant to the research. In phase 5 ‘refining, defining and naming themes’, I fine-tuned the themes and gave them final captions, so that each theme was structured around a central idea and had a clear message (see Braun, Clarke 2022: 35f). The emergence of themes not only shaped the section titles in the analysis but also guided the detailed and rich description of my participants’ experiences of sexual self-discovery and disclosure.

Beyond the interview material, I also drew upon the field diary and observation notes as additional data sources, which contributed to the final formulation of certain themes. Once the main themes of the study had been identified, I explored suitable theoretical frameworks to further contextualise them. Finally, I wrote a chapter for each theme (phase 6 ‘writing up’),

weaving together a compelling analysis with rich data extracts. These chapters directly addressed the research questions in a structured way (see Braun, Clarke 2022: 35f).

In summary, reflexive TA is an iterative and flexible process that requires active interpretation rather than passive identification of patterns. As a researcher, I needed to engage deeply with my collected data, balance immersion with analytical distance, and critically reflect on theoretical influences and my own standpoints. By following the six-phase process, I was able to develop rich, meaningful themes, that provide valuable insights into my research questions.

4 Case Study

The present chapter shifts focus to my field research, beginning with an exposition of the ethical principles that underpin my study. This is followed by a detailed account of the research process. The chapter then provides an in-depth analysis and interpretation of my findings and concludes with the summary of key insights derived from the research.

4.1 Ethical Principles

First and foremost, it is imperative to consider ethical considerations prior to the discussion of the case study. This research was meticulously designed to be based on ethical principles, thereby ensuring the safety, confidentiality, and autonomy of all participants involved. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, their role in research, and their rights as participants. They were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without providing justification, and that they retained the right to refuse the use of their data for the study, even after it had been collected. This all was documented in a consent form, which I presented to my participants when they decided to be part of the study. Signing the consent form was optional. All participants were over the age of 18.

All participants were provided with my contact information to facilitate communication should they have any questions or concerns. Interviews were scheduled at convenient times and locations that would provide a sense of comfort and safety for the participants. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, all names and identifying details were anonymised. However, it is important to mention that some individuals named in this study were not anonymised. The persons in question did not participate directly, rather, they supported me in finding interviewees. As they live openly with their sexual identities in Nepali society – and in some cases are well-known public figures such as artists, authors, poets and activists – I chose to refer to them by their real names rather than using pseudonyms, which has been agreed with them.

4.2 Research Process

Phase 1: Preparation and Initial Planning (January to mid-June 2024)

The initial phase of my research centred on organisational and logistical preparations, the refinement of my methodological approach, and the undertaking of preliminary research.

In the beginning of 2024, to finance my stay, I submitted an application for a short-term scientific research scholarship from the University of Vienna. The funding was granted in April, enabling the intended research. Therefore, in April and May, I proceeded with the practical

arrangements, including booking of flights, the acquisition of insurance, and reservations of accommodations in Kathmandu Valley.

During this period, I devoted my attention to a comprehensive understanding and refinement of the methods I intended to employ in the field. This involved re-developing skills in participant observation to effectively observe and document social interactions, familiarising myself again with biographical-narrative and semi-structured interviews to collect rich, personal accounts from potential participants, and learning how to systematically record and organise field notes. To facilitate this process, I decided to maintain a digital field diary for documenting my observations and reflections in an organised and accessible format.

Furthermore, I concentrated on the ethical implications of my research, which entailed ensuring the anonymity of participants and emphasising the voluntary of their involvement¹⁵.

In early June, I conducted an intensive search for events, organisations and people related to the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Kathmandu Valley. I utilised connections during previous stays in Nepal. I also used Instagram and Facebook to identify relevant institutions, groups and individuals advocating for Nepal's PoMSOGIESC+ community. I achieved this by firstly examining social media accounts of institutions with which I was already familiar, namely the Blue Diamond Society Nepal, Mitini and kaalo.101. Due to my previous stays in Nepal, I knew beforehand that those organisations actively support the PoMSOGIESC+ community and provide content for them. Then I analysed their postings to find out with which queer activists, celebrities and queer influencers the aforementioned organisations had collaborated with. I followed several social media accounts of prominent queer figures in order to gain insights into the community and potential points of contact. I then repeated the process and identified further organisations and individuals who publicly engage with queer-related topics by looking through their Facebook and Instagram accounts. In addition, I examined the social media of friends in Nepal who are either part of the PoMSOGIESC+ community themselves or frequently comment on queer-related topics. I then searched through their posts for other relevant institutions, upcoming events etc.

Phase 2: Initial Engagement and Networking in Kathmandu Valley (June 18 – July 2, 2024)

The second phase of my research began upon arrival in Kathmandu on June 18, 2024. I initially stayed at a friend's hotel in Dhapasi Height, Kathmandu, where I took the first few days to acclimate. In this phase, which I spend directly in the field in Kathmandu Valley, I was primarily focused on planning, orientation and the establishment of relationships through networking,

¹⁵ See chapter 4.1.

with the objective of fostering trust. The phase was characterised by my participation in the PoMSOGIESC+ community, intensive observation and the establishment of first connections, and reflections on the research strategy.

First and foremost, I planned to establish my presence in the community, through continuous attendance of public events during Pride Month. I developed an Excel-based schedule to structure my research goals and activities, and research events, according to the opportunities of Pride Month. I visited the following events during Pride Month:

- *Drag for Visibility – 2* (21 June 2024, Hard Rock Café Kathmandu, Durbar Marg, Kathmandu)
- *Open Mic, Open Heart, Open Mind* (22 June 2024, Tara House, Sanepa, Lalitpur)
- *Queering the Bond* (30 June 2024, as part of the Metamorphosis exhibition by kaalo.101 in collaboration with Queer Honky-Tonk, Basantapur, Kathmandu)
- Discussion on *Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes* (2 July 2024, YUWA office, Lazimpat, Kathmandu)

By attending these events, I gained initial insights into the queer scene in Kathmandu Valley and began to establish a network within the PoMSOGIESC+ community. Combining participant observation with personal interactions at those events provided a promising foundation for further fieldwork. For each event I attended, I wrote a detailed observation protocol as well as field dairy.

The first event I visited was *Drag Show for Visibility - 2*. This event, organised by Save the Children and the BDSN, among others, constituted my inaugural direct encounter with the community. The audience was diverse, comprising members of the PoMSOGIESC+ community, institutional representatives, and allies. The most noteworthy aspect of the event was a competition among drag queens and kings from Kathmandu Valley. One particularly interesting performance was delivered by a drag queen named MomoLicca, who effectively integrated humour with a call for environmental awareness. Motivated by their ingenuity, I initiated contact with MomoLicca also known as Ahaan via Instagram and subsequently conducted a short interview with them on June 26 via FaceTime (see Observation Protocol 2024: Drag Show -2 for Visibility; Aahan 2024: Protocol 1).

On the following day, I attended *Open Mic, Open Heart, Open Mind*, which was organised by Global Shapers Kathmandu and Nepal Mental Health, focused on mental health issues affecting PoMSOGIESC+ individuals. The event featured a series of artistic performances, including musical compositions, poetic readings, and informative presentations, which collectively

contributed to an atmosphere of intimate exchange and reflection. This event demonstrated the convergence of mental health and creative expression within the PoMSOGIESC+ community. I engaged in discourse with numerous participants, including one of the founders of Queer Honky-Tonk, Shuby, who recognised me from the previous drag show event and who I already knew from my project work *Songs of Revolution* from two years back. They offered me valuable insights into their work. Queer Honky-Tonk organises networking events for the queer community and shares every event for the community in Kathmandu Valley on their social media. They invited me to their upcoming event *Queering the Bond* (see Observation Protocol 2024: Open Mic, Open Heart, Open Mind).

Queering the Bond was held end of June as a networking event to cultivate connections within the PoMSOGIESC+ community. It was part of an art exhibition by kaalo.101. It was exclusively open to queer individuals, aimed to build connections within the PoMSOGIESC+ community and to create a safe space for intimate exchange. Through the utilisation of interactive activities and discussions, participants were able to share experiences and establish rapport. During the course of the event, it was evident that such safe spaces empowered individuals to express themselves and form meaningful bonds. Because I also took part as a participant, I was able to get to connect with many rather young people from the PoMSOGIESC+ community in the valley. We exchanged thoughts, stories and got connected on social media. I also got to know one of my future participants Dhirendra in person with whom I had a long conversation which facilitated a deeper mutual understanding and established a foundation of trust for future collaboration (see Observation Protocol 2024: Queering the Bond).

In the beginning of July, I attended the discussion on *Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes* within Nepal, organised by YUWA. YUWA is a young adult-led non-profit organisation that advocates for empowerment. Participants shared personal narratives, emphasising the societal and familial pressures they face. Shreya, the moderator, shared a particularly poignant account of her fear of disappointing her mother, which resonated deeply with me. Here, my proficiency in Nepali proved advantageous, as the discussion was conducted primarily in Nepali. This discussion provided valuable insights into the internal and external conflicts faced by queer individuals and highlighted potential themes such as the impact of familial and societal expectations, mental health and identity navigation, which were further explored in my research (see Observation Protocol 2024: Discussion on “Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes”). Not only did I visit several events for and with PoMSOGIESC+ individuals, I also re-established connections from previous stays in Nepal and formed new ones. Ben, a German friend of mine, who is living in Kathmandu and who is an active part of the PoMSOGIESC+

community, introduced me to several prospective contacts. Initially, I had the opportunity to get in touch again with Bikram, an acquaintance of Ben, who I already got to know in 2022. Subsequently, he became one of my research participants. I also got introduced to Niranjana Kunwar, a well-known queer author and representative of the PoMSOGIESC+ community. In 2021, he published his coming out memoirs and therefore became a prominent figure. Furthermore, Niranjana not only consented to a meeting but also facilitated the dissemination of my research project to a network of queer activists across Nepal, thereby facilitating an expansion of my outreach. Followed by this, I was contacted by Ajit, a resident of Nepalgunj and Surkhet in Western Nepal, with whom I began an email correspondence. Ajit became one of my in-depth research participants later on. Towards the end of June, I had an informal meeting with Niranjana, during which we had the opportunity to become acquainted, share experiences, and engage in productive exchange of ideas. He expressed great interest in my project and pledged to assist me further in identifying potential participants. He also suggested me to read his memoir "Between Queens and the Cities" (2021), which I bought right after the meeting and started to read.

Through a close Nepali friend of mine, who is a freelance artist, I got connected with the director of Jhomedia, a Nepal-based creative space and media channel, producing podcasts and talk shows. This connection resulted in further interactions with individuals involved in the production of a Pride Month episode on queer issues. Among these were Sabin and Dharendra both of whom I had brief conversations with and who expressed interest in my project.

This initial phase demonstrated the significance of visibility and trust within the community. In the subsequent stages of the project, I planned to cultivate deeper relationships, conduct formal interviews, and continue attending events and visit queer friendly spaces to further integrate into the PoMSOGIESC+ community in the valley. This phase established a foundation for my fieldwork through a combination of methodical preparation with dynamic, context-driven engagement. It illuminated the intersection of creative expression, advocacy, and mental health within the queer community in Kathmandu Valley. Key connections with Dharendra, Sabin, Shreya and Ajit were essential in the continued development of my research.

Phase 3: Deepening Engagement, Research Refinements and Interviewing (July 3 – July 25, 2024)

During this phase, I focused on deepening existing relationships while expanding my participant base through new connections and strategic networking. I maintained regular communication with key contacts including Niranjana, Bikram, and Ajit via WhatsApp, thereby

fostering consistent engagement. Additionally, I met with Dharendra and Sabin to strengthen our rapport and further discuss their involvement in my research.

At this stage, personal recommendations were still crucial in expanding my network. Sanjog, a photographer friend of mine, introduced me to Urja, a curator and former journalist. During our meeting at Baber Mahal, Thapathali, Urja provided the contact information of a transgender couple in Jhapa, Eastern Nepal. Despite unsuccessful attempts to establish contact with them, this connection highlighted opportunities for exploring PoMSOGIESC+ perspectives beyond Kathmandu Valley in the future. Furthermore, she recommended a selection of articles from Nepalese newspapers featuring and addressing PoMSOGIESC+ individuals, as well as scientific articles about queer issues in Nepal.

Similarly, my friend Ben introduced me to Anush and Krishna, two members of the PoMSOGIESC+ community, both of whom expressed willingness to participate in my research project.

Following my participation in the YUWA panel discussion on homophobia, I contacted Shreya to ascertain her interest in contributing to my research. This follow-up underscored the value of event-based interactions as a foundation for building trust and initiating meaningful cooperation. Together, these efforts enriched my understanding of the community's diversity while laying the groundwork for future engagements.

In addition to the establishment of new connections, I refined my research aims, because so far over the course of my fieldwork, it became clear that I needed to adjust the focus of my research slightly. While my original aim was to explore how queer individuals navigate societal and familial expectations, I initially intended to address three key areas: The influence of family and societal norms and values, the ways in which PoMSOGIESC+ individuals negotiate heteronormative spaces, and their potential impact on shaping new family forms in Nepal. However, as my participant pool developed, it became clear that so far no one had started their own family yet, making exploration of this last area less relevant. Instead, I shifted my attention to the autobiographical narratives of my participants, particularly their coming out experiences. This adjustment allowed me to delve more deeply into the personal dimensions of navigating family and societal expectations, focusing on how participants perceived and managed family norms, how their gender identity and sexual orientation were expressed in private and public spaces, and how these experiences shaped their sense of self. This refinement ensured that the research remained grounded in the lived realities of my participants, while maintaining the original aim to capture their experiences within these structures. Due to the adjustment of my research questions, I needed to refine my methodology and revised my interview strategy, with

the objective of ensuring that these were better aligned with the research aims. I decided to structure the interviews for both short- and long-term participants into three thematic sections: Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood/coming out. For participants with whom I engaged over an extended period, multiple in-depth interview sessions or dialogues were conducted, with each session focusing on one of these themes. The interviews were designed to follow a narrative format, with questions and prompts serving primarily as guiding cues to encourage participants to share what comes to mind within these overarching themes.

For participants with whom I engaged in a single session, I implemented a shorter, semi-structured interview format, utilising more explicit, focused questions. This approach was adopted to gather concise yet meaningful data while accommodating the limited time available (see Interview Guideline 2024). This strategic adjustment was relevant because I already held several informal conversations and conducted interviews with several participants during this phase (see below), which provided valuable insights and helped further contextualise my understanding of their lived experiences as PoMSOGIESC+ individuals residing in Nepal.

For instance, I continued to communicate with Ajit via email, thereby demonstrating my ongoing interest in his participation as a long-term/in-depth participant. A telephone call was scheduled for July 7th to discuss the logistics of an in-person meeting, which he had indicated was his preferred option over virtual interviews. Due to logistical challenges, namely high airfare for non-Nepalis and unsafe monsoon road conditions, I considered travelling to Nepalgunj in late July or August as an alternative if Ajit was unable to come to Kathmandu.

At the same time, I maintained regular contact with Sabin and arranged a meeting on 5th July 2024, at the Takpa Gallery in Lazimpat, where he was curating an art exhibition. The objective of the meeting was to formally introduce the research project in more detail, to discuss the terms of his involvement as a long-term/in-depth participant, and to conduct an informal dialogue alongside the first segment of a formal interview focused on his childhood memories. Additionally, I introduced Sabin to the use of analogue photography, an optional element of the project designed to engage participants creatively. Sabin expressed significant enthusiasm for the creative aspects of the project, which contributed to a constructive and collaborative atmosphere (see Sabin 2024: Protocol 1). Recognising the importance of engaging with participants' lives to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences and strengthen our connection, I attended the opening of the Master's Exhibition of the Kathmandu University Design Faculty on July 8 at Sabin's invitation. As one of the curators, Sabin was highly occupied during the event, however we briefly conversed, during which he expressed his appreciation for my presence.

Such interactions are crucial for building trust and rapport with participants, demonstrating genuine interest in their lives beyond the research context. By participating in their lives and showing personal engagement, I aimed to cultivate a relationship of mutual respect, thereby avoiding the perception of instrumentalising their involvement solely for research purposes. Instead, it builds a sense of trust and collaboration, which contributes to a more meaningful and reciprocal research process.

On 14th July 2024, I met with Dharendra at Utpala Café in Boudhha, following a prior introduction through Neha from jhomedia. This meeting served to strengthen our relationship and formally initiate his participation in my research project as a long-term participant. Dharendra greeted me warmly, thereby establishing a positive atmosphere for the remainder of the evening's proceedings. I outlined the structure of the interview process, after which Dharendra participated in an interview where he shared thoughtful insights into his upbringing and first school years. His responses reflected a notable degree of openness and curiosity, contributing valuable depth to the interview. This meeting was significant as it solidified trust between us and marked the start of a collaborative research relationship. Dharendra articulated a keen interest in the creative dimension of the project, particularly the use of analogue photography, which he enthusiastically embraced (see Dharendra 2024: Protocol 1). His readiness to engage with the research process and contribute his personal narrative enhanced the depth and contextual richness of my study, offering a nuanced perspective on the navigation of queer identity in Nepal.

On 25th July 2024, I met Anush, a social worker and founder of the non-governmental organisation Rainbow Disability Nepal¹⁶, at his office in Baluwatar. The initial contact had been facilitated by Ben, and I was already familiar with Anush through his mention in Niranjana Kunwar's memoir. The meeting commenced with a warm welcome, during which Anush provided a comprehensive overview of his personal history, emphasising his experiences as a disabled queer individual and his endeavours in providing support to others with similar experiences. His openness and confidence during our one-time interview setting provided valuable insights into his childhood, adolescence and current activism.

This meeting was of particular significance as it introduced a unique perspective into my research, focusing on the intersection of disability and queerness in Nepal. Anush's willingness to engage candidly enriched the depth of the data collected and his request for collaboration on promoting his NGO demonstrated mutual trust. The interview concluded with the mutual

¹⁶ <https://rainbowdisabilitynepal.org/>

agreement to maintain contact for the purpose of future collaborative endeavours, thereby ensuring the continuity of his significant research connection (see Anush 2024: Protocol 1).

On 25th July 2024, I also met Binod, a Nepali Master's student in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies, through a serendipitous encounter at Rainbow Disability Nepal. Binod, who was also conducting research on the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Katmandu for his thesis, introduced himself as I was leaving Anush's office. After a brief introduction, we decided to conduct an impromptu interview at a nearby Café. During our meeting, Binod shared his personal journey as a queer individual and provided insights into his childhood and adolescence in Nepal, and current experiences in Nepal and the US, where he nowadays resides, as well as his academic background and his perspective as a researcher navigating intersecting identities. He expressed enthusiasm about being an interviewee rather than a researcher for a change, which contributed to a relaxed and open dialogue.

The post-interview dialogue proved to be particularly enlightening, as it led to a discussion on methodological approaches and challenges in the field. Binod emphasised the benefits of being a Nepali researcher, including enhanced accessibility to participants, the ability to conduct interviews solely in Nepali, cultural familiarity and shared experiences, which fosters even more trust (see Binod 2024: Protocol 1). The meeting underscored the challenges I faced as a foreign researcher such as linguistic barriers as well as the complexities of addressing topics that are culturally sensitive, such as caste and economic status. Binod's insights into his research strategies prompted a refinement of my approach, particularly in navigating intersectional issues such as caste, class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. Beyond the provision of valuable data, the discourse served to enhance my comprehension of local research dynamics and provided practical guidance for methodological adjustments to address these challenges more effectively.

Also on 25th July 2024, I met Krishna, a dentist based in Kathmandu Valley, at Himalayan Java in Maharajganj, Kathmandu. The encounter, facilitated through Ben's introduction, commenced with Krishna apologising for his delay due to work obligations, immediately showcasing his friendly and approachable demeanour. Following a brief introduction, we proceeded to conduct a one-time semi-structured interview, focusing on his childhood, adolescence, and current life. Despite the lack of structure in the conversation due to Krishna's tendency to jump between topics, his openness and enthusiasm provided valuable insights into his personal experiences as someone who hides his sexuality and family dynamics.

Despite the interview's occasional disorganisation, it successfully generated meaningful data for the research. Krishna expressed a genuine interest in the project, indicating his eagerness to

stay in touch (see Krishna 2024: Protocol 1). His readiness to engage and share his personal narrative rendered the meeting both productive and pertinent, thus contributing a significant dimension to the scope of my study.

This phase highlighted the intricacies inherent in conducting fieldwork in a culturally diverse and sensitive context. The presence of challenges including language barriers and cultural sensitivities necessitated continuous adaption. However, these challenges also underscored the significance of reflexivity and PCA. In the subsequent phases of this research, the focus was on deepening relationships with key participants (long-term participants), expanding the geographic scope of the research beyond Kathmandu Valley, and considering intersectional aspects. This iterative process continues to refine both methodological approach and understanding of the lived experiences of GBQ individuals in Nepal.

Phase 4: Strengthening Connections, In-depth Interviewing and Data Processing (July 26 – August 25, 2024)

During this phase of my fieldwork, the focus was on the consolidation of relationships with key participants, further engagement in their daily lives, and the conduction of follow-up interviews. At the same time, I worked to expand my network and include new participants in the study, such as Anil, who was introduced to me through Ben after discussing his interest in my project. Additionally, I began processing previously collected data, transcribing and organising my field notes.

On 27th July 2024, I attended an Open Mic event at a museum that had been organised by Dhirendra. Despite his preoccupation with the event's logistical aspects, Dhirendra articulated his gratitude for my attendance and introduced me to several of his friends. We also briefly discussed plans for our next meeting, reaffirming his commitment to my research.

Our subsequent meeting was held on 1st August 2024 at the Sky Park Restaurant in Bhaishapati, Lalitpur. During our interview session, Dhirendra shared detail accounts on his teenage years, including schooling, family dynamics, and early experiences of same-sex attraction. Following the conclusion of the formal interview, he shared a deeply personal account of sexual harassment, offering critical insight into the lived realities of queer individuals navigating public spaces in Nepal. The fact that he shared this with me in confidence strengthened our bond even further, seamlessly integrating research objectives with the development of a genuine rapport (see Dhirendra 2024: Protocol 2). These meetings not only provided valuable data but also cultivated a collaborative and friendly relationship, which enriched the depth and authenticity of the study.

On July 30, I met Bikram for lunch in Thapathali near his office. Bikram shared valuable insights about a previous research project on Nepali queer autobiographies. He offered to lend me a copy of the resulting publication, potentially enriching the academic context of my study. He also agreed to participate in a one-time interview session, with plans to meet again end of August/September.

On August 2nd, 2024, I conducted a second in-person interview with Sabin. Following a series of scheduling challenges attributable to Sabin's busy schedule, a meeting was convened at the Garden of Dreams in Thamel. Despite arriving 20 minutes late due to unforeseen traffic conditions, Sabin greeted me warmly, and the two of us subsequently engaged in a casual exchange over coffee, during which he shared updates on his current art projects. Following the informal dialogue, I initiated the interview, during which Sabin spoke openly about his adolescence, coming in terms with his sexuality, his academic journey as well as a traumatic period of sexual abuse from age 14 to 18. This was a profoundly intimate topic that Sabin seldom discussed, yet he felt compelled to disclose it. This was an indicative of the trust that had been established over the course of our collaboration, and which I deeply appreciate. As it grew dark and began to rain, we concluded our conversation. The interview was characterised by a mutual sense of trust and transparency, and we agreed to stay in touch via WhatsApp (see Sabin 2024: Protocol 2).

Between July and August 2024, I engaged in multiple meetings with Shreya, in which our relationship evolved significantly, transitioning from an initial professional connection to a more personal and collaborative rapport. The initial meeting, held on 29th July at the YUWA office, focused on discussing her participation in the research and conducting a narrative interview centred on her childhood. It was during this interview that she demonstrated a willingness to open up and share deeply personal and emotionally charged experiences, and in the process, helped to establish a foundation of trust. By the conclusion of the session, she had conveyed her enthusiasm for long-term involvement in the project, which would encompass supplementary interviews and optionally photo documentation (see Shreya 2024: Protocol 1). Subsequent meetings served to consolidate our relationship. On 7th August 2024, Shreya and I met at Patan House Café, Lalitpur, where the relaxed atmosphere enabled a combination of formal interview and informal dialogue. During this meeting, Shreya provided a comprehensive account of her personal experiences during her teenage years, highlighting the challenges faced by transgender individuals in Nepal, such as her boyfriend. She offered critical insights into healthcare disparities and cultural stigmas faced by the trans community. Following the

interview, we shared a Newari meal and explored Patan's temple complexes, thereby strengthening our bond through shared experiences (see Shreya 2024: Protocol 2).

The final formal interview was conducted on 22nd August at Soul Café, Lazimpat, where her narratives encompassed her college years, relationships and experiences with selective coming out. The conversation was characterised by intimacy and introspection, marking the conclusion of our interviews (see Shreya 2024: Protocol 3).

On 24th August, I accompanied Shreya to a design and flea market at Patan House Café, an event to which she had invited me. This gathering enabled me to meet her friends and partner, thus facilitating further immersion in her social world. The opportunity to engage with her immediate social circle over the course of the afternoon and evening afforded significant insights into the dynamics of their queer young friend group, while also serving to reinforce the friendly and trusting relationship that had been established during our earlier interactions.

From 14th to 17th August 2024, I hosted Ajit in Kathmandu, arranging his flights and accommodations to facilitate our in-person meetings and interviews. During this period, we engaged in extensive personal interactions, fostering a deepening of our connection and the establishment of trust. Ajit introduced me to his favourite hang-out places in Kathmandu and Lalitpur, which he considered as his safe spaces. These included a gay bar in Thamel, hidden Newari restaurants and tea shops close to the temple complex in Patan. He also took me to visit a friend of his, who, coincidentally, was also a good friend of Shreya. This integration into Ajit's social circle and personal spaces facilitated a deeper understanding of his life and identity as a queer individual in Nepal. Two formal interviews were conducted during the visit, focusing on his childhood, adolescence, schooling, experiences of coming out, and challenges he faced as a homosexual man in Nepal, especially living outside Kathmandu Valley on the countryside. Both sessions were characterised by a relaxed and detailed exchange, reflecting the rapport that had been established over time. Ajit spoke openly about his journey, sharing stories with clarity and emotional depth. Beyond the interviews, casual interactions, including sharing meals, coffee and tea breaks, board games and walks around town served to strengthen our bond. Ajit's visit enriched my understanding of Ajit's lived experiences and demonstrated the value of blending structured research, with informal, relational engagement to form a base of trust (see Ajit 2024: Protocol 2, 3).

During Ajit's visit to Kathmandu, he was invited to present a poem he had written at a poetry event in Kathmandu, which coincidentally took place a week after his arrival in the city. As a result, he decided to extend his stay. The event featured several queer poets as speakers, as well

as many well-known figures from the queer community. Ajit invited me to be his guest, an offer which I accepted.

On 23rd August 2024, I attended the event entitled *The Prides Palette: A Night to Remember – Unravelling Emotions and Expressing Desires* at 10x Thamel¹⁷. Organised by the Gehendra Dhimal Foundation¹⁸, this event, which combined poetry and music, showcased the creative voices of Nepal's PoMSOGIESC+ community. The event provided an opportunity to experience artistic expression of Nepalese queer poets, with intimate performances that dealt with themes of sexuality, identity, and societal challenges. Ajit delivered a poem that poignantly conveyed the bond between him and his sister. My attendance and my support throughout the event further deepened our connection and trust. The event also offered rich opportunities for networking and relationship building. The occasion provided the opportunity to reconnect with familiar persons, such as Ahaan, Nirajan and Shuby, while also getting to know Anil, to whom I was in contact earlier in August, and his partner Thomas – they are one of the first same-sex married male couples of Nepal. These interactions not only expanded my network within the community but also reinforced the importance of shared creative spaces in fostering dialogue and solidarity. It was at this event that I first experienced a sense of belonging and acceptance within the community. The evening proved to be a significant addition to my research, seamlessly integrating personal connections with more profound comprehension of queer poetic expression in Nepali (see Observation Protocol 2024: *The Prides Palette: A Night to Remember – Unravelling Emotions and Expressing Desires*).

Phase 5: Final Data Collection, Data Processing and Reflection (August 27 – September 30, 2024)

In the final phase of my fieldwork, I conducted the remaining interviews, continued transcribing my interview material and visited some of my participants to say goodbye. The period also provided an opportunity to reflect on my research journey and the initial preparation of my analytical and theoretical framework.

In the final weeks of my fieldwork, my interactions with Dhirendra reflected the strong relationship we had developed throughout the research process. On 26th August, we met again for a casual lunch near his workplace. Despite the challenges of a crowded Tibetan street restaurant and an intense thunderstorm that made conversation almost impossible, the shared experience of navigating flooded streets and heavy rain gave our meeting a light-hearted,

¹⁷ A night club in Thamel.

¹⁸ The foundation aims to empower communities by promoting artistic expression and creativity through comprehensive training, workshops, and various cultural initiatives (<https://www.dhimal.org/>).

memorable quality. Dharendra returned my camera during this encounter, having taken 22 photos, documenting his life. Although there was not an opportunity for a formal interview that day, the meeting further cemented our bond. To accommodate Dharendra's busy schedule, we decided to conduct the interview asynchronously. I sent him structured questions via WhatsApp that focused on his coming out experiences, his decision not to come out to his parents, and the challenges of living a queer life in Nepali society. On 4th September, Dharendra responded with detailed voicemails. His openness and thorough responses provided valuable insights and demonstrated the trust and mutual respect we had developed (see Dharendra 2024: Protocol 3).

On 12th September, I visited Dharendra at the museum, he works at, during his lunch break to say goodbye before returning to Europe. He was delighted by the gesture and our farewell was warm and kind. These final interactions highlighted the depth of our relationship and his significant contribution to my research.

On 30th August 2024, I met Anil, a freelance social worker, for an interview at Kyampa Social Hub in Sanepa, Lalitpur. As mentioned above, the connection was facilitated by my friend Ben, and our brief interaction at the poetry event helped to establish a positive rapport. Anil greeted me warmly in arrival, and we began with casual conversation about work, the event where we first met, and other light topics, setting a relaxed tone for the interview. The formal interview was insightful and productive. Anil openly shared detailed accounts of his life, including his marriage to his German husband and the legal recognition they achieved as a married same-sex couple in Nepal. His candidness provided valuable perspectives on the social and legal challenges faced by PoMSOGIESC+ individuals in the country. The trust and openness he demonstrated was instrumental in deepening the quality of the data collected. This meeting was particularly significant for my research, as it provided a unique perspective on the intersection of personal identity and systematic progress within Nepal's PoMSOGIESC+ community. Anil's willingness to remain available for follow-up conversations underscored the strength of the connection we had established and underscored the collaborative nature of the research process (see Anil 2024: Protocol 1).

On 9th September 2024, I conducted a brief interview with Sabin via FaceTime, due to his busy schedule. Despite being in a small roadside restaurant during the call, Sabin was open and candid, sharing detailed reflections on his personal experiences and insights into queer issues. His willingness to engage, even in a public setting, demonstrates the trust and rapport we had built during the time we worked together. The interview, though brief, provided meaningful data and reinforced the importance of his contributions to my research. At the end of our FaceTime call, he expressed heartfelt gratitude for having the opportunity to contribute to the

research, share his stories and to have a platform to voice his experiences to a broader audience. His words deeply moved me and underscored the importance of creating space for these narratives. On 30th September 2024, I visited Sabin at the Nepal Art Council, where he was co-organising a Fine Arts Bachelor Diploma Show. He was happy to see me there and we exchanged warm goodbyes, marking the end of our on-site collaboration. This final interaction not only cemented our bond but also underlined his appreciation for my support and commitment to his work (see Sabin 2024: Protocol 3)

On 10th September 2024, I conducted an interview with Bikram at Croissant Café during his lunch break. This interview marked the third meeting between us, following an initial encounter in 2022 and a lunch meeting in July, where we reconnected after a two-year pause and discussed my research project. Bikram, a social scientist and humanitarian aid worker, participated in a literary project about queer autobiographies in Nepal in 2013, making his insights particularly valuable for the study. During the interview, Bikram shared openly about his experiences, building upon his autobiographical account in the book “Pride Climbing Higher” (2013). It was evident that he adopted a different tone when discussing sensitive subjects such as his sexuality and queer identity, suggesting that these topics continue to be subjects of social stigma in Nepal. The interview yielded substantial data on navigating queer identity within personal and professional contexts. Despite the brevity of the session, Bikram expressed gratitude for the research focus and the opportunity to contribute, thereby underscoring the significance of his participation (see Bikram 2024: Protocol 1).

This phase marked the end of my research stay in Kathmandu Valley. The next steps were to transcribe and analyse my remaining interviews to place them in a theoretical context alongside the other data collected, such as informal conversations and participant observations.

Challenges, Difficulties and Reflection

During my fieldwork stay in Nepal, I encountered a series of challenges that not only tested my adaptability but also compelled me to engage in critical reflection on my positionality as a researcher.

A particularly salient difficulty was navigating my role as a researcher from Europe studying the lives of PoMSOGIESC+ individuals in a country where historical and socio-political contexts have shaped perceptions of foreigners. While my positionality afforded me certain privileges, such as access to certain spaces – I was often welcomed into events and gatherings out of curiosity and hospitality – and the willingness of some individuals to invite me into their social lives, seeing my research as aligned with advocacy or awareness-raising rather than judgement or discrimination, it also created barriers of trust. At times, in the early stages of my

fieldwork, people who helped me to find participants expressed concern that they might feel instrumentalised for the purposes of my research, which required careful navigation to cultivate genuine connections and mutual understanding. I frequently grappled with questions about ethics of my presence: For instance, was I merely an outsider extracting knowledge for my own benefit? Was I unintentionally reproducing power imbalances by approaching members of the community with my academic agenda? These reflections triggered moments of self-doubt and required me to constantly reassess my methods to ensure they were respectful and reciprocal. I also faced difficulties in relation to engagement with prominent organisations such as Mitini Nepal, Blue Diamond Society Nepal and Queer Youth Group. Initially, I thought that these well-established institutions, renowned for their outreach within the PoMSOGIESC+ community, would serve as key entry points to participants and offer valuable contextual insights. However, endeavours to establish meaningful collaborations encountered significant impediments. The most salient issue pertained to accessibility. Despite repeated attempts, including the use of emails, text messages, telephone calls, and in-person visits, establishing a direct line of communication or scheduling meetings proved challenging. This was partly due to the organisations' substantial workload and resource constraints, which resulted in the prioritisation of immediate community needs over academic cooperation. I was therefore not able to schedule a single meeting with anyone involved with BDSN neither QYG. I was also confronted with conditions that I could not meet. For instance, Mitini Nepal was only willing to collaborate on the condition that I only relied exclusively on FLINTA people. This was something that I could not and would not guarantee at this early stage of the research in June/July. Confronted with these challenges, I arrived at a critical moment of introspection. I recognised that operating autonomously, without the constraints of institutional affiliations, engendered a heightened degree of flexibility and a more grassroots approach. By cultivating individual connections directly within the PoMSOGIESC+ community, I was able to establish trust on a personal level, offering participants a sense of agency and collaboration. This approach also enabled navigation of complex relational dynamics, ensuring that the presence felt less like an institutional intervention and more like an empathetic dialogue. This strategic shift towards independent engagement enabled me to adapt my research approach to align with the community's requirements, which led to more authentic and meaningful connections. This experience underscored the significance of cultural sensitivity, trust-building, and adaptability in navigating the complex landscape of fieldwork in sensitive contexts. Also, despite the utilisation of snowball sampling, the composition of the participant base did not align with my initial intersectional objective. A substantial proportion of the participants were

homosexual men, and there is a paucity of diversity in terms of caste and ethnicity relative to my original intentions. Furthermore, the objective to incorporate a more extensive range of genders and sexual orientations within the PoMSOGIESC+ spectrum encountered challenges. It seemed that, due to the network and connections available to me, homosexual men emerged as the most accessible group for this research.

Despite possessing Nepali language skills at university level, language barriers were a further significant challenge. The Nepali I learnt for five semesters, also referred as government or administrative Nepali, differs from the Nepali spoken by the majority of the population in Kathmandu Valley. The colloquial Nepali spoken on the street is difficult for me to understand in terms of grammar and pronunciation; conversely, Nepalese people in the field sometimes had problems understanding my Nepali. Consequently, it was not possible to conduct in-depth interviews or engage in complex conversations. Although many participants spoke English, the expressions of emotion, humour and cultural context were sometimes lost in translation. Indeed, speaking the participants' mother-tongue can be helpful for gaining trust. Instead, I relied on the establishment of trust through the sharing of experiences and cultural sensitivity. I often felt that the linguistic discrepancy hindered the full potential of the interactions.

The subjects of caste, economic status and familial expectations, when addressed in dialogues and interviews, posed additional challenges due to their cultural sensitivity. These topics are inextricably linked to personal identity and societal hierarchies, rendering them a delicate subject to navigate without causing discomfort or misunderstanding. For instance, the direct questioning of participants' views on subjects such as caste or economic status carried the risk of reinforcing pre-existing stigmas or evoking distressing memories of marginalisation. It was necessary to carefully design these interactions in a manner that honoured the participants' personal boundaries while simultaneously exploring intersectionality. This necessitated a high degree of flexibility and patience, frequently allowing participants to guide the discourse and determine the extent to which they were willing to delve into their personal histories.

Notwithstanding these challenges, these experiences served to underscore the importance of reflexivity in my research process. I realised that being transparent about my intentions, vulnerabilities, and limitations helped to build trust with my participants. For example, openly acknowledging my linguistic struggles or cultural unfamiliarity often encouraged my participants to guide me, thus fostering a more collaborative dynamic. Additionally, I focused on integrating myself into some of my participants' daily lives, not merely as a researcher but as a curious and empathetic individual. Events, shared lunches and dinners as well as casual

conversations fostered the establishment of genuine connections that transcended the confines of the academic framework.

The challenges experienced also taught the importance of embracing a Participant-Centered Approach, prioritising the comfort, agency, and autonomy of those with whom I was working. The adaptation of methodology to the unique dynamics of each interaction enabled the gathering of rich data while ensuring that my participants felt respected and valued. This experience has profoundly influenced my ethical approach to fieldwork, underscoring the significance of balancing academic objectives with the establishment of meaningful interpersonal connections.

4.3 Findings and Analysis

Four main themes were drawn from the interviews, field diary, and observation protocols: (1) Heteronormativity, heterosexism, and constraints on gender and sexual expression; (2) family as framework and boundary; (3) becoming oneself – stages of gay, bisexual and queer identity development and (4) between coming out and coming with. Each theme is explained in detail in a subchapter and illustrated with excerpts from participant interviews. The narratives presented are representative for broader patterns, not all available accounts are included in each subchapter.

4.3.1 Heteronormativity, Heterosexism, and Constraints on Gender and Sexual Expression

This chapter explores how societal expectations rooted in heteronormativity and enforced through heterosexism shape the ways in which GBQ individuals move in Nepali society, illustrating how and to what extent they express or strategically conceal their gender and sexual identities. In social environments where appearance, behaviour, or mannerisms are closely read for signs of deviance from dominant gender norms, those perceived as nonconforming – e.g. ‘too feminine’ – can face punitive reactions. Being labelled as different not only impacts social relationships, but also self-image. Whether in the form of subtle disapproval or overt discrimination, the pressure to conform can be deeply internalised. In such contexts, where the study’s participants reside, they, as GBQ individuals, must constantly assess how much of their identity they can safely reveal. The participants move within a range of social settings – family, school, university, workplaces – where normative assumptions about gender and sexuality are taken for granted.

Heteronormativity in Nepali Society

Heteronormativity refers to the social and cultural enforcement that positions heterosexuality as the expected and most legitimate form of sexual orientation (see Chambers 2003: 25f). It operates through both implicit and explicit mechanisms, positioning heterosexuality as the default sexuality. The marginalisation of non-heterosexual identities occurs not only through overt discrimination, but also through everyday assumptions that structure institutions, interactions and cultural narratives, such as common belief systems and ideas about what is considered normal, desirable and/or natural. For individuals who do not conform to heterosexual norms, these assumptions significantly hinder their visibility, recognition, and social acceptance (see chapter 2.1.2).

In Nepali society, heteronormativity is deeply embedded in cultural values and social expectations. It becomes visible in the expectations to marry heterosexually, conform to binary gender roles, and maintain appearances aligned with masculine or feminine ideals. Throughout the following narratives of the study's participants, these norms come apparent.

Ajit's experiences illustrate how heteronormative assumptions are embedded within Nepali societal structures. He observed that "heteronormativity is deeply rooted" (Ajit 2024: Transcript 2), shaping not only his own handling of gender-conforming expectations but also of others in his community. This becomes clear in a story he told about a homosexual friend, who returned to Nepal after studying abroad and immediately got re-exposed to the heavy pressures of familial and societal expectations. Ajit shared how his friend, now in his early thirties, had just returned from the U.S., where he had experienced relative freedom of expressing queerness openly. He recalled after returning home, his friend faced a harsh reality: "Every day I feel so good about my sexuality, when I'm in the streets and when I'm all rainbow and butterfly. While I'm here, I know all these colors are going to fade out once I am home" (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3). Back in Nepal, he was immediately pressured by his parents to marry a woman – a demand rooted in the normative framework that positions heterosexuality as the standard life path. In response, Ajit's friend chose to come out to his parents during Pride Month. The reaction of his parents was the following: "His father was struck, his mother did not move from her chair even after half an hour. She was shocked" (ibid.). The father's eventual response underscores how heteronormativity operates as coercive accommodation: "We don't care whatever you do. You should just go and live abroad, get married with a foreign girl and have a baby" (ibid.). In this logic, the maintenance of heteronormative appearances, especially in front of society, takes precedence over the individual's lived truth. The idea of the father is not to accept homosexuality, but displace and mask it, ideally outside national borders, where society has

less insight into the family's life and therefore social scrutiny is less intense. Even after coming out, the familial silence that followed reflects discomfort with homosexuality that challenges established norms. While Ajit told that his friend is no longer pushed into a heterosexual marriage, the family's concerns remain tied to their societal perception. As Ajit pointed out, despite his friend being a university topper, Harvard graduate and a lawyer – someone his parents could proudly present to society, the pressure to fit into heteronormative roles remains. This account emphasises how heteronormativity in Nepal can be upheld not only through direct rejection of PoMSOGIESC+ identities, but also through subtle demands to conform, be silent and invisible. Even when queerness is tentatively recognised, it is often conditional, only accepted if it is hidden, distanced, or reshaped to conform heterosexual norms.

Sabin, too, recounted a personal experience that underscores how heteronormativity is embedded within everyday interactions, particularly through the recurring assumption that heterosexual marriage is mandatory and universally desired. He recalled:

“I remember one of these incidences that happened in my university where I teach. So, there's one teacher, she is almost my mom's age, and she was very loud about this. Every time she would meet me, she would say: “Sabin, when are you doing the party of your wedding? I want you to get married really soon! This season! This summer! This winter” It was always like that, and I would present myself like this [points to his outfit, which was a women's kurta, plateau boots and pearl earrings]. And she would still be like that, you know” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2).

Despite his visibly gender-nonconforming appearance, his colleague insisted that he follows the heteronormative life path, especially the expectation of marrying a woman. For Sabin, the interaction brought frustration, because the heteronormative expectations came from someone with educational and social exposure. He shared: “If you don't understand this, how would my parents understand this. You encounter so many different kind of people and this still does not register?” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2). This interaction reveals a moment of hopelessness for Sabin. Sabin's experience illustrates how heteronormativity can operate through constant assumptions, that social scripts that are repeatedly projected onto individuals regardless of their self-expression or lived realities. He reflected more broadly:

“[H]alf of the population, I would say, I hope less than half of the population still think this is not natural or, you know, this is against the nature or against God, religion, or in general, this is against the society or social norms. So, it would create obstacles, you know, unnecessary problems here and there” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 3).

Further reinforcing heteronormative notions in Nepali society, he added: “All of my friends have got married, all of them have children” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2). Sabin’s account illustrates how heteronormativity is not only reinforced in educational and professional settings but also upheld in his social environment. At the same time, his narrative highlights how deviations from normative gender and sexual expression are often misunderstood.

Bikram’s narratives also point out how heteronormativity is embedded in Nepali society. He described growing up in an environment where heterosexuality and traditional gender roles were expected by default, leaving little room for diverse expression of identity. He reflected: “[I]t’s a very heteronormative society, so by default you are expected to fall under that category” (Bikram 2024: Transcript 1). His narratives reveal how these expectations shaped his experience from a young age, especially through comments about not being “man enough” (ibid.) and warnings about the risks of not conforming. Bikram’s experiences show how deviations from normative expectations are often commented on, which possibly can lead to the subtle adoption of dominant ideals of masculinity that are continually reinforced within the social environment he grew up in.

Shreya’s narrative also offers insights into how heteronormativity becomes visible in Nepali society. During her first years in college, she encountered deeply embedded heteronormative notions in an institutional setting that rendered queerness as deviant. Shreya recounted an incident, where a professor openly made homophobic and transphobic remarks:

“One of our professors is a psychology professor, so he teaches us child adolescence and juvenile delinquency. I was not in the lecture but what he said was asexual people and aromantic people are abnormal. I heard it from one of my classmates. It was so hard to process because I’ve heard multiple transphobic comments from him and a lot of homophobic comments. It made me feel so bad. It is so scary to see these people teaching psychology especially. My public college especially is full of very reserved people. They are not open to the concept of being queer” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 3).

This incident illustrates how heteronormative ideas are institutionalised through education where queerness is rendered as something abnormal, reinforcing a social environment in which non-heterosexual identities are marginalised and invalidated.

In her daily life, the expectation to follow a heteronormative trajectory – being seen as a “perfect girl” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 2), dating men, marrying a cis man, and having children – operates as an unspoken social standard. This normativity not only shapes how others perceive Shreya but also the ways in which she can present herself without facing questioning or doubt. As she reflected:

“So, I think a lot of it comes from how restrictive our society is and the narrative of being this perfect girl or a perfect boy. Because the expectation that my parents have from me is to get married to a boy, obviously, cis man, and to have a child, of course. And that is just the steps that I can go forward to. (...) Also because of the narrative of how you should have a boyfriend and not a girlfriend. I think that is also what restricted me so much. (...) I think there was never any question about my sexuality because I think I look very straight. So, I think that was the reason why people never questioned it” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 2).

Her account underscores how visibility, gender presentation and perception as well as perceived conformity to heteronormative ideals deeply impact her ability to express herself openly, often leading to self-censorship, fear, and constraints in their agency. Shreya further explained that this is not just a localised experience but part of a wider regional context:

“I think it is not just Nepali society to be honest. I think it is more of Asia. There is this whole big taboo about being queer. And I think the dating culture in Asia is not as open as Western dating cultures. And there are literally no dating spaces for young people. And your children dating someone, their gender is such an alienated concept for parents. And I think that is also why it is such a big deal for parents because they want their children to fit in in society. They want them to be respectable. I think they prefer their children to be doctors rather than be gay” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 3).

Shreya views heteronormativity as a broader Asian issue that positions GBQ individuals as deviations from the heterosexual norm. At the same time, she believes that maintaining social respectability often takes precedence for parents over supporting their children in living authentically in a safe accepting environment. This broader reflection situates her personal experiences within a cultural framework that privileges conformity and respectability over authenticity, revealing how heteronormativity is both individually felt and structurally reinforced.

The narratives presented all together show how heteronormativity in Nepal can function as both a personal and structural force, shaping educational institutions, workplaces, family dynamics and everyday interactions. The participants’ experiences demonstrate how societal expectations of heterosexuality and binary gender roles not only marginalise GBQ individuals but also represent barriers for them to live openly, authentically and secure.

Heterosexism in Nepali Society

Closely linked to heteronormativity is the concept of heterosexism which refers to the societal assumption that heterosexuality is not only the norm but also the natural, ideal therefore the only legitimate form of sexual orientation. As a result, any deviation from this standard is often

viewed as inferior and abnormal. Herek (1995) described heterosexism as an ideological framework that rejects, devalues and marginalises any behaviour, identity, relationship, or community not conform to heterosexual norms (see *ibid.*: 321). Heterosexism operates both subtly and overtly, manifesting in everyday interactions through implicit biases, as well as through more explicit forms of exclusion, discrimination, or even violence (see chapter 2.1.2). Ski Hunter (2007) noted that individuals who maintain rigid expectations about gender roles are particularly likely to react negatively to same-sex or non-heterosexual orientations (see *ibid.*: 7).

Herek (1995) explained that “[h]eterosexism is manifested at both the cultural and the individual levels” (*ibid.*: 322). Cultural heterosexism, much like institutional racism and sexism, is embedded within societal customs and institutions, operating through a dual mechanism: On one hand, homosexuality¹⁹ is rendered invisible; on the other, when homosexual individuals do become visible, they are frequently met with hostility and punishment. Cultural heterosexism as structural marginalisation becomes apparent in the lack of legal protection against discrimination in areas such as employment, housing, education and health services (see *ibid.*).

Anush’s experience exemplifies this dynamic. His story illustrates the deeply entrenched nature of cultural heterosexism and the tangible harm it inflicts on queer individuals, particularly those who are multiply marginalised – Anush is homosexual, disabled, and orphaned. After coming out as gay publicly on a radio show in 2013, he lost his housing, scholarship and overall stability, revealing how cultural heterosexism can have immediate and extensive consequences on GBQ individuals’ lives. Although he courageously became one of the first openly gay disabled individuals in Nepal, his act of visibility, however, was met not with support but with social and institutional rejection as well as penalisation. He shared:

“As a first person of Nepal, you know, to being a disabled and being a gay. I opened out in the media. And very next day, I lost everything. The orphanage kicked me out. And my scholarship, the education scholarship was boycotted” (Anush 2024: Transcript 1).

His experience demonstrates how cultural heterosexism is entrenched in societal institutions like education and welfare systems, which instantly withdrew support once he disclosed his sexuality. For Anush, these consequences were devastating:

“Because of me coming out in the media, I lost my education. It was hard for me, because being a disabled, above that, I could not cope with that situation. Nobody

¹⁹ Herek explicitly talks about homosexuality, not about queerness in general.

would cope with that situation. Imagine you being disabled, and you don't have any family members, and you are being part of a queer community. It's really hard” (Anush 2024: Transcript 1).

Lacking familial support, institutional back-up, and a safety net, his public coming out marked not a moment of empowerment but instead regret and deep vulnerability. As he reflected on this turning point in his life, he now believes that visibility can come at too high of a cost, stating that “if I had a chance again, I would not come out, but I would work on education to make my life better” (ibid.). His narrative highlights how, under cultural heterosexism, queer visibility can lead not to liberation, but to systemic punishment and complete loss of stability – consequences that are even more devastating when compounded by other forms of marginalisation, such as disability and being an orphan.

In addition to cultural heterosexism, individual or psychological heterosexism operates at the personal level as its manifestation in thoughts, emotions, and actions. As Herek (1995) explained, “[p]sychological heterosexism is the individual manifestation of cultural heterosexism” (ibid.: 322), therefore the internalised reflection of culturally sanctioned heterosexist norms, expressed through personal disgust, hostility, or moral condemnation of homosexuality and queer individuals. These sentiments are not limited to private attitudes, they often come apparent in verbal abuse, harassment, discrimination, and even physical violence (see ibid.) Empirical studies (e.g. Berrill 1992; Gross, Aurand 1992; Herek 1993) have consistently shown that a significant number of gay and lesbian individuals have been direct targets of such mistreatment (see Herek 1995: 322). Hunter (2006) further emphasised, that “core factors contributing to heterosexism at the individual level are prejudice and stereotypes” (ibid.: 6). These stereotypes often reproduce cultural ideologies, such as assumptions that queer people are inherently inferior and threatening. Specific stereotypes, for instance, that all lesbians are masculine or all gay men are feminine, and all feminine men are gay, relate sexual orientation inherently with gender role nonconformity (see Herek 1995: 323). These stereotypes reduce PoMSOGIESC+ individuals to narrow and distorted notions, enabling those who have internalised bias about their inferiority to justify discriminatory treatment. Anil, for instance, offered a poignant reflection in this dynamic:

“I was polite, I was soft-spoken, I was calm. So, somewhere, my attributes were always compared to the feminine side. And in a very toxic masculine environment, that is often considered inferior, let's say. Because you're different” (Anil 2024: Transcript 1).

Ajit’s experiences offer an example of how psychological heterosexism, rooted in prejudices and stereotypes, operates at an individual level and can shape GBQ people’s lives long before

they come out. Although Ajit was not openly gay during his school and college years, his expressions and interests were enough for others to perceive him as queer. This perception alone led to verbal harassment and rejection – forms of behavioural expressions of psychological heterosexism. Peers and even some of his brother’s friends mocked him, calling him names like छक्का²⁰ and हिजडा²¹, partly degrading terms associated with perceived femininity of gay men.

Ajit recalled an incident of harassment during exam preparations with male classmates:

“And during my college, like I knew everyone, and I was comfortable with everyone, but I realized most of them were conservative regarding my sexuality (...). I was not openly gay, but they could sense my queerness by the way I used to talk, the way I used to walk, the way I used to say things, the way I used to advocate for queer rights. (...). And one day I remember (...) something that I was really saddened by: We were studying because our exams were around the corner and there were five men including me. And the guy I was dating just called me (...). While preparing for the exam, I used to get calls from my boyfriend because he used to miss me. My ex-boyfriend, he used to call me once in a while, more often in a day. And one of the men, not friend, said: “Why is that guy calling you all over again? He must be doing you in a way.” Like he said: “He probably fucks you a lot.” I couldn't say anything to be more assertive of my sexuality because I was not out and I could not embrace my sexuality back then” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

Because he was not out at the time, Ajit felt unable to defend himself or assert his identity. This illustrates how internalised fear, caused by societal prejudice, can silence GBQ individuals.

Ajit began experiencing criticism for his gender-nonconforming behaviour as early as childhood that deeply affected him. He recalled a childhood memory that led him to alter how he expressed himself:

“In my neighborhood, we used to watch TV and there was an ad with children and I was singing the song of that ad along with the children in the TV and [my mum] (...) just literally said: “Don’t behave like that, so feminine, you are acting like a girl!” My face got all red because of the shame and there were people around us when I was told so. Since then, I used to hesitate singing. I used to be such a bad kid, singing along everything that used to come on TV. But after that incident, I did not just sing anything” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 1).

What began as a joyful expression of self quickly became a source of shame, showing how early exposure to gender role expectations can suppress authentic self-expression. Although

²⁰ Chakkā: slang, vulgar, derogatory term for eunuch and transgender person.

²¹ Hijda or hijra – see chapter 1.3 for the meaning.

Ajit expresses himself more freely nowadays, remnants of internalised shame remain until today. He shared how, as a man who enjoys wearing nail polish, he often felt that this is wrong: “I always preferred putting nail paints. (...) I used to feel embarrassed when people call me out” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 2).

Ajit’s narratives underscore how psychological heterosexism reinforces social norms while delegitimising homosexuality through bullying and shame, especially when compounded by gender-nonconforming behaviour and appearance.

Binod’s experiences, also, demonstrate how psychological heterosexism operates by policing of gender-nonconformity and stigmatising queer expressions, through harassment and bullying leading to trauma. From a young age, his feminine mannerisms, such as playing with scarves, feeling comfortable among girls, stood out against rigid norms of masculinity, making him vulnerable to scrutiny. At school, this visibility became a source of relentless bullying and harassment. After seeing Binod’s handwriting, his science teacher exclaimed, “[t]his is pathetic. Your handwriting is very feminine” (Binod 2024: Transcript 1), while throwing Binod’s notebook on the floor. He even went further by calling Binod’s parents, telling them: “[Y]our child is abnormal (...) dumb, very slow and they need to do something to have a better future” (ibid.). Such comments reinforced the notion that feminine men are inferior. This incident also caused that Binod withdrew his interest from science, even though he used to enjoy it. This harassment extended to his classmates, who bullied him for having what they perceived as feminine traits. Some touched him inappropriately, made invasive comments about his body, and even pressured him to prove his masculinity. These experiences forced Binod into self-monitoring behaviours, like avoiding drinking water to escape using the school restroom, fearing that classmates would be waiting there to harass him (see ibid.). That negatively impacted is physical health. He reflected:

“Because I was not stick to the traditional gender norms about man being masculine. (...) I was more on the feminine side. And it used to create curiosity on them like, who is feminine? Like, what is his genital look like? That's, I can assume it now. Like, they've never told me this way you're feminine. Not that way. But (...) I can tell you 100%. It's because of that” (Binod 2024: Transcript 1).

Binod’s story underscores how deeply ingrained stereotypes, such as linking femininity in men to abnormality, enable and justify the mistreatment of those who deviate from gender-conforming expectations, reinforcing heterosexism on an individual level.

Dhirendra’s experiences further reflect how psychological heterosexism and rigid gender norms have an impact on GBQ individuals in Nepal. Dhirendra articulated the broader societal context, why coming out and living authentically can be so difficult for many:

“I think it's very clear why it's difficult for a lot of Nepali people to come out and express their sexual orientation because definitely people have this idea that being straight is the default and if you're anything other than straight then there's something wrong with you, right? So, because this is something that's already in their mindset and it's also something they're not willing to learn about diversity, that's why it gets difficult. And there are so many reasons why I feel like Nepali society is not very accepting” (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 3.3).

Dhirendra's narratives illustrate how heteronormativity and heterosexism operate on structural levels and through personal encounters. He reflected that from childhood onwards, his feminine expression and his passion for dancing marked him as different. His innocent and expressive behaviour, his participation in dance classes was interpreted through a lens that pathologised any deviation from dominant masculine norms:

“[P]eople used to take it as a reference to judge you if you were something outside, maybe if you're behaving something outside the binary, for example. So, if you're a guy, if you're kind of feminine, then they used to label you as something, you know. And, yeah, it used to be difficult that way” (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 1.1).

Although some people enjoyed watching him dance, others seized on his expression as an opportunity to ridicule him, by passing comments like “that's so gay” (ibid.). Back then, such remarks felt deeply insulting for Dhirendra, leaving him with the impression that dancing as a boy was shameful, therefore something he should not be doing. The lack of male participation in his dance classes, combined with the stigma around boys engaging in activities perceived as ‘feminine’, further discouraged him. Reflecting on the experience, Dhirendra described it as triggering:

“But certain parts of my childhood are kind of triggering sometimes when I think about it, especially when it comes to me expressing myself as I told you, that I really like dancing and the form of dance that I used to do was considered kind of feminine. So, some of the moves that I would do would trigger, some of the people would not want to, you know, just see me expressing in ways that would be considered feminine. So, in that regard, something that I used to like very much, that is dancing, I had to quit completely” (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 1.1).

Dhirendra's experience with dancing reflects stereotypes identified by Herek (1995), which equate femininity in men with homosexuality. These assumptions were not only internalised by those around him during childhood but also persisted into adulthood, surfacing in various encounters. For instance, shortly before our second interview in August 2024, Dhirendra was casually mocked simply for wearing a small earring: “[S]ome young guys, when I had one time just worn like one small earring. They just told me like gay” (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 2).

Dhirendra's account reveals how psychological heterosexism is not always directly recognisable, but it can be insidious, operating through whispered jokes, comments, or subtle disapproval. Yet, this can condition GBQ individuals to suppress what brings them joy due to fear of rejection and ridicule.

These narratives reveal how heterosexism in Nepal becomes visible both structurally and interpersonally – through institutional neglect, policing of gender expression, and persistent stereotyping. These mechanisms, whether overt or subtle, collectively marginalise those who deviate from heterosexual and gender-conforming norms.

Methods of Adaption

As the narratives above illustrate, many participants in this study experienced rejection, bullying, or harassment during childhood and adolescence due to their perceived nonconformity, particularly expressions of femininity that did not align with the expectations assigned to their perceived gender. In response to this societal pressure, many participants described periods in their lives in which they sought to adjust their behaviour, mannerisms and appearance to suppress aspects of their identity, or present in ways deemed socially acceptable. This often involved downplaying femininity, adopting stereotypical masculine traits and/or conforming to heterosexual relationship patterns to avoid scrutiny and to be perceived appropriately gendered. For some participants, these adoptions were limited to particular stages of their lives or social contexts, for other, they remain part of ongoing strategies to navigate societal expectations.

Such performative negotiations of identity and the pressure to conform to socially acceptable expressions of gender can be understood through West and Zimmerman's concept of Doing Gender (1987), which challenges the idea of gender as a fixed, biologically determined trait and instead frames it as a continuous social practice shaped by interaction and societal expectations. According to their theory, gender is not something one 'has', but as something one 'does', an ongoing enactment of behaviours deemed appropriate for one's socially assigned sex category. Doing Gender highlights the active creation and performance of gender through everyday behaviours, shaped by societal expectations. West and Zimmerman argue that individuals must actively perform gender to be socially recognised. This performance is not merely personal but rather embedded in institutional structures that reinforce inequality by rendering gender roles appear natural and inevitable (see *ibid.*).

Their approach also reveals how gender norms support Compulsory Heterosexuality (see Rich 1980), as the interplay of Doing Gender and heteronormative expectation exert powerful social pressures on individuals to enter heterosexual relationships, positioning them as the default and

natural way of existence. Heterosexuality is reinforced by visible, socially accepted gender markers, such as appearance, clothing or behaviour, that individuals are expected to adopt in order to be read properly gendered (see West, Zimmerman 1987: 144f). For those who deviate from heterosexual norms, such as lesbian women and gay men, these markers can function as camouflage, allowing them to ‘pass’ as heterosexual (see Frye 1983 as cited in West, Zimmerman 1987: 154). For instance, Binod adapted to societal pressures by conforming to heteronormative ideals. He made a fake girlfriend in 9th grade to prove to his peers that he was not queer, that he fitted into society’s expectations (see Binod 2024: Transcript 1). Additionally, Krishna revealed that he deliberately tries to behave straight nearly in all areas of his life, to prevent others from detecting his homosexuality and insulting him (see Krishna 2024: Transcript 1). Furthermore, in an effort to conform to societal expectation, Sabin, in his teenage years, went through a phase of wearing plain brown and grey shirts – colours considered more masculine – despite preferring colourful, patterned clothes (see Sabin 2024: Transcript 1).

Butler’s theory of Gender Performativity (1988) builds on ideas similar to West and Zimmerman’s concept of Doing Gender. Gender Performativity posits that gender is not an innate trait but constituted through repeated actions that align to societally sanctioned norms. Rather than expressing a stable identity, these repeated performances respond to cultural expectations and pressures. Butler argued that gender is a social construct shaped by historical and cultural discourses, particularly those that reinforce heterosexuality. These performances are neither entirely voluntary nor strictly imposed but are regulated by dominant norms. Over time, their repetition creates the illusion of a natural gender identity. Deviating from expected gender performances exposes this illusion and reveals gender as a socially constructed fiction (see *ibid.*).

The frameworks of Doing Gender and Gender Performativity are especially relevant to GBQ experiences, as seen in the narratives of participants in this study. They show strategies of conformity that reflect not their true gender identity, but a performative response to societal pressures – acts carried out to ensure safety, belonging, or acceptance in a context where deviation from normative gender roles often leads to discrimination.

Ajit’s narrative illustrates how, already from a young age, he felt pressured to consciously regulate his behaviour and suppress aspects of his identity to a socially acceptable masculine image. After being criticised for singing along to a TV song – and act deemed ‘feminine’ by his mother – he became acutely aware of how his expressions were policed:

“There are lots of incidents that happened that questioned my personality. I used to struggle to think of how I have to operate around people, then I had to suppress my expression so that only masculine side of me was seen” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 1).

This reflects how the performing of normative gender roles is not merely a personal choice, but a strategy of adaption to fit in, shaped by social pressures and expectations. Although Ajit often presented a more masculine image in childhood, and sometimes still does today, he has gradually learned to embrace his authentic self, even if that means stepping outside binary, heteronormative gender expectations:

“I'm very confident about my sexuality and I have embraced my feminine side – embraced my feminine side confidently rather. I used to feel embarrassed if I wore nail paints and mehendi. But I don't feel shy or embarrassed, if I do now, it's fine” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

This therefore reflects his efforts to challenge and move beyond the rigid notions of behaving according to his assigned gender reflecting his socially accepted sex category.

Binod's narratives also highlight how societal expectations can pressure individuals to perform masculinity in order to be socially accepted. He recalled a childhood memory that illustrates how moral policing from his community led to him suppressing parts of himself that were perceived as feminine by others:

“But sometimes when other people from my community visit my house and they're like, your boy is feminine, please correct him. You know, the moral policing towards your child. So, they're like: “Son, I mean, please don't do this.” And I was like: “Okay”” (Binod 2024: Transcript 1).

He also described the difficulties of navigating school life, where he felt compelled to act more masculine to avoid discrimination: “[D]uring my school, it was very tough because I had to act more masculine sometimes, just for the sake of not getting discriminated by my classmates.” (ibid.). This narrative illustrates how not conforming to socially accepted norms could lead to being targeted. It shows how conforming gender performance can become a protective strategy in contexts where nonconformity risks social exclusion.

Bikram's narrative further sheds light on how societal expectations around gender push individuals to consciously modify their behaviour to align with dominant forms of masculinity. Bikram recalled how his brother would teach him to “talk a certain way, (...) walk a certain way” (Bikram 2024: Transcript 1), to behave in a more masculine manner. This was framed as some sort of protection, a way to shield him from potential judgement or harm by making sure he did not appear in a way that others might ridicule (see ibid.).

Similarly, Sabin experiences further demonstrate how social pressures to conform shape the performance of masculinity through staged behaviour. He recalled how a close friend, whom he once had a crush on, taught him to “walk like a masculine man” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2), which they practiced daily to fit into societal expectations. Sabin also reflected on how this effort stemmed from an underlying sense of shame and uncertainty about his gender expression, leading him to adopt masculine mannerisms as a coping strategy (see *ibid.*). Nevertheless, today, he came more into terms with not fitting into the norm, embracing himself more authentically, wearing flowy, colourful clothes and jewellery (see *ibid.*: Transcript 1, 2; chapter 4.3.3: *‘Coming In’: Acceptance, Embracement, Empowerment*).

Dhirendra also described how, especially during his childhood and early teenage years, he would consciously try to “boy up” (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 2), convincing himself to act more like what he believed boys were supposed to do. This included participating in sports, avoiding dance, as it is perceived as a feminine activity by his surrounding, and aligning with stereotypical male behaviours, even when these did not feel authentic (see *ibid.*). However, similar to Ajit and Sabin, Dhirendra nowadays embraces both his masculine and his feminine side, feeling tired of constantly performing according to society’s expectations (see *ibid.*).

All these narratives reveal how societal pressures and rigid gender norms shaped the participants’ experiences, particularly during childhood and adolescence. Many altered expressions considered feminine and therefore as not fit to gender-conforming mannerisms by mainstream society to avoid rejection, bullying, and/or marginalisation. In response, they frequently adopted socially accepted masculine behaviours, appearance, and heterosexual relationship roles as strategies to fit in and evade discrimination. Examples, such as Ajit’s early suppression of femininity, Binod’s fake girlfriend to align heteronormative ideals, Bikram’s brother coaching him into masculine behaviour, Sabin learning to walk manly and Dhirendra convincing himself to ‘boy up’ by adopting stereotypical masculine activities, demonstrate how gender-nonconformity invites social sanction and how conforming gender performance becomes a necessary strategy for safety, acceptance and social legibility. Over time, some participants have begun to resist these constraints, embracing more fluid and authentic expressions of gender that extend beyond binary frameworks and heteronormative ideals, illustrating the enduring power of social norms and the possibilities for individual agency within them (see chapter 4.3.3: *‘Coming In’: Acceptance, Embracement, Empowerment*).

4.3.2 Family as Framework and Boundary

The family unit plays a significant role in shaping individual life trajectories, also in relation to gender and sexuality. As many participants in this study have highlighted, family structures in

Nepal tend to be close-knit and interdependent, deeply embedded in broader societal norms. Most individuals reside with or in close proximity to their families, signifying the strong sense of familial interconnectedness and the central role of family in an individual's social standing. Many of this study's participants, such as Ajit, Anil, Bikram, Binod, and Shreya were raised in a nuclear family and lived there for a significant portion of their lives, some, like Dharendra, Sabin and Krishna, continue to live with them. Ajit, Binod, Bikram and Shreya only moved away to study and work. Anil nowadays lives alone with his husband, but near his parents. Aahan, who grew up in a joint family in Southern Nepal, now resides independently in Kathmandu, but awaits his mother and sister to arrive soon to live with him. In the families of Anil, Bikram, Binod, Dharendra, Sabin and Shreya work was divided along gender lines: Men were typically responsible for income generation, while women managed domestic tasks. These divisions, along with expectations around heterosexual marriage and the subsequent establishment of a family, reinforce broader heteronormative ideals. Individuals who do not conform to these norms may experience significant challenges within their family environments. For many participants in this study (e.g. Ajit, Binod, Dharendra, Krishna, Sabin, Shreya), these expectations created substantial barriers to openly express their sexual identity. The fear of being misunderstood, rejected, or disappointing led several to delay or entirely avoid coming out to their parents. This reluctance to disclose their sexual identity was often reinforced by previous experiences of subtle or explicit discrimination from family members, particularly when participants exhibit behaviours that were perceived as deviating from gender-conforming norms (e.g. perceived lack of masculinity). The tensions reflect what Horton (2018) identified as the ambivalence of home for LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Asia: A space where acts of care and violence are not mutually exclusive but deeply entangled. Within the family, pressures to marry and reproduce, grounded in the expectation to preserve social status, often clash with queer desires for self-defined forms of love, pleasure, and intimacy (see *ibid.*: 1069).

Marriage emerged as being of particular sensitivity. As a socially and culturally celebrated milestone, it is frequently discussed not only within the immediate family but also in extended kinship networks and public spheres such as the workplace. Some participants developed coping mechanisms to deflect or avoid these conversations, while others expressed growing anxiety about how to manage these expectations in the future. The heteronormative concept of marriage, often then accompanied with childbearing and the division of labour along gender lines is thus likely to exclude LGBTQIA+ individuals. The societal pressure to marry someone of the opposite sex and start a family is probable to compel LGBTQIA+ individuals to either

conform or distance themselves emotionally and/or physically from their families (see Allendorf, Ghimire 2013: 3f; Oli, Onta 2012: 198f).

However, not all experiences are marked by rejection. For instance, one participant, Anil, entered a same-sex marriage and described being accepted by his family and now lives a relatively discrimination-free life with his partner in Lalitpur, Kathmandu Valley (see Anil 2024: Transcript 1; chapter 4.3.4: *Disclosure to Parents as Particularly Sensitive Terrain*). His case underscores the complexity and variability of familial responses and the potential for acceptance. At the same time, some participants (e.g. Aahan, Ajit, Sabin) emphasised the deep importance of family as a source of emotional support, housing, and belonging. For some, choosing not to come out is a strategy to preserve family unity and avoid rupture (see chapter 4.3.4: *Disclosure to Parents as Particularly Sensitive Terrain*), suggesting that while the family can be a boundary regarding the expression of one's queer identity, it can also serve as a framework for support and care. The following draws on the narratives of the study's participants to explore the significance of family in their lives and the extent to which they influence whether they are able or choose to express or disclose their sexual identity. In addition, the topic of marriage is addressed: Participants describe how they struggle with marital expectations, while others have found ways of handling.

Importance of Family

Aahan's narrative illustrates the central role his family plays in his life. He has disclosed his sexuality to his mother and sister, who are gradually moving toward greater acceptance (see chapter 4.3.4: *Disclosure to Parents as Particularly Sensitive Terrain*). His mother even made encouraging remarks, noting, for instance, that he appears more confident nowadays with his professions in drag and queer tourism – an observation Aahan interpreted as a subtle sign of support (see Aahan 2024: Transcript 1). Having grown up in a joint family, Aahan now assumes financial responsibility, caring for his mother, sister, and himself. This sense of duty is central to how he defines his role within his family, as he explained: “For the three of us. I can look after myself, my sister and my mom right now. And I think that matters to them a lot, because at the end of the day, that's what you want” (ibid.). This statement can be read as an affirmation of the central role family plays in his life.

However, Aahan also remarked that his mother “has told [him] (...) to do like a thousand different kind of jobs” (Aahan 2024: Transcript 1). Taken together, these statements could reflect an underlying tension between identity and duty. While Aahan's mother encouraged him to explore various career paths, the expectation remained that he would assume the traditional role of male breadwinner – especially after his father's passing. As he put it, “I became the man

of the family, right?” (ibid.), indicating the weight of familial responsibility placed on him, regardless of his sexual identity. Aahan found a way to make his gay identity a source of professional strength, as he co-runs a queer travel agency with two friends, an achievement he attributes to living openly and confidently as a gay man (see chapter 4.3.3: *‘Coming In’: Acceptance, Embrace, Empowerment*). His story demonstrates that even without conforming to heteronormative expectations, he is still able to provide for his mother and sister. In doing so, Aahan merges traditional family roles with a proudly queer identity, showing how visibility and self-acceptance can become tools for personal, familial, and financial empowerment.

Anil’s experience stands out as a compelling example of full familial acceptance and emotional support, as briefly mentioned earlier. Although he initially felt anxious about coming out to his parents, his fears were quickly dispelled when his parents responded with understanding and love. They had likely sensed his queerness early on, as he recalled displaying stereotypical signs, but chose not to react with judgement. Instead, their response was calm and supportive (see Anil 2024: Transcript 1; chapter 4.3.4: *Disclosure to Parents as Particularly Sensitive Terrain*), which created an environment where Anil could be open about his identity. Importantly, this acceptance extended beyond his nuclear family. Anil noted that even his extended relatives welcomed him and his partner without hesitation. He shared:

“I have a very open-minded family, not just my parents. None of my relatives have had problems with me being married. They’ve accepted me with open arms since the day, they know my story” (Anil 2024: Transcript 1).

Despite growing up in a household that followed conventional gender roles, his family’s open-mindedness made it possible for him to live authentically. For Anil, family does not act as a boundary to his sexual identity, but rather as a stable, affirming foundation.

Following Aahan and Anil’s account, Ajit offers a contrasting yet equally poignant narrative about the deep bonds and tensions within his own family. Ajit comes from a traditional Hindu-Brahmanical, middle working-class Nepali household. He explained:

“I have a mother, father, one elder brother and one sister. Both of them are married. (...) we work together, we eat together and we may not be the wealthiest family, but we are the happiest family, I’d like to believe” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 2).

Ajit described a warm, emotionally close household rooted in shared routines and modest living. These sentiments point to the foundational role that family love and cooperation play in shaping his sense of belonging.

Ajit’s relationship with his family, especially his parents, is marked by both care and constraint. His father is generally indifferent and non-controlling, while his mother is more concerned with

societal norms and appearances (see Ajit 2024: Transcript 3). From a young age, Ajit was subtly supported in his expressions of identity: His mother taught him to cook, his father occasionally ignored his use of lipstick. Yet, these moments of quiet acceptance coexisted with moments of shaming. He reflected being disciplined for singing as well as wearing nail polish and mehendi (see *ibid.*: Transcript 1, 3; chapter 4.3.1: *Heterosexism in Nepali Society*). His father even warned that wearing women's garments could shorten a man's life (see Ajit 2024: Transcript 2), a superstition reflecting the gendered myths that stigmatise nonconformity.

Despite such contradictions, Ajit emphasised the emotional importance of his family: “[H]ow deeply rooted my feelings are with my family. We have always been so intact within. It's very hard for me to let go of those feelings of not being home, not feeling like home anywhere” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3). This emotional closeness makes the idea of disclosing his sexuality to his parents particularly difficult. He shared:

“I don't think sexuality is a problem for me to navigate these days, but I can see my sexuality being a problem in the future with my parents, but I don't care about others. Even though my extended family knows about me, I don't care as long as my parents don't get affected by that” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

Ajit's hesitation to disclose his sexuality stems not entirely from fear of rejection, but rather from the desire to protect his parents from social judgement. He explained:

“I am just dosing my mom's expectations. I know, there will be coming those days where they will be forcing me to get married. I may even have to tell them that I am queer and that I am only interested into men” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

Ajit's narrative demonstrates the dual role of family as both an emotional anchor and a source of social constraint. While his upbringing fostered confidence, care, and a strong sense of responsibility, it also instilled unspoken expectations around masculinity, heterosexuality, and social image. The resulting tension between familial love and loyalty on the one hand, and personal authenticity on the other hand, remains unresolved. For now, he chooses collectivism over individualism and silence over coming out to sustain stability, support and emotional closeness within the family and to avoid rupture. However, his account exemplifies the complex terrain that many GBQ individuals must navigate within their familial relationships.

For Dhirendra, family is somewhat an anchor but also a subtle barrier to self-expression. Dhirendra's bond to his family reflects a relationship shaped by societal expectations and cohabitation. In his context, living with his mother, father, and sister is not just a norm but also demonstrates familial duty and respect. However, expression of affection is rare, and the generational gap to his father makes open dialogue even harder. Communication remains largely superficial, revolving around daily logistics rather than emotional and personal topics.

Although Dhirendra values his family and feels somehow an emotional bond with them, the absence of openness makes it difficult for him to express his true identity. He shared:

“[F]amily feels more validating somehow because I’m living with them and also because they are important to me. So, I feel like that’s where it all comes in because the conversation doesn’t happen really about anything. Not just about this thing that I’m talking about, like identity or expression, but rather about anything at all”

(Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 2).

This silence creates an emotional distance that makes self-expression feel out of reach. Despite Dhirendra’s appreciation of security and belonging his family provides, he simultaneously feels emotionally constrained and longs for a deeper, more meaningful connection – one that allows space to share his truth. The lack of open dialogue within the household leaves him feeling unable to fully express himself.

Cultural expectations add further complexity. Living away from family is often interpreted as disrespectful or unloving, an act that would be commented on negatively from society. Dhirendra longs for personal space and autonomy, but it comes with challenges as he reflected:

“But if you are living in Kathmandu valley and your parents also live in the same place but you're just living in different places inside the valley, then they would just take it negatively. And also the society, they would gossip (...). I mean, living separately comes with challenges but it's very important as well for you to grow as a person. Especially in terms of meeting new people and just doing the things that you like doing. There is so much control sometimes, even when you are an adult”

(Dhirendra: Transcript 1.2).

For Dhirendra, personal space is important for personal growth and self-expression. However, he encounters difficulties in achieving this while living with his family, where he feels compelled to conceal parts of his identity. He believes that moving out would not only support his independence but also foster emotional maturity and a deeper connection with his parents. He reflected: “I feel like the love would be more, the bonding would be more stronger assuming if you are living separately from your parents” (ibid.). His vision is not about distancing himself emotionally but about creating healthier and more open familial relationships through more physical space.

Similar to Dhirendra, Sabin also lives with his parents and conforms outwardly to the norm. Yet he quietly dreams of having his own space:

“If I consider my mental health, it would be a pleasant thing to do. Maybe the best case for now would be me having a space on my own, living there most of the times, but weekly coming back spending a weekend” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2).

Financial pressure, as living alone is expensive, and social expectations keep him in place, despite his desire for independence. “Even if I present this idea to my mum, she would be completely shocked” (ibid.), he further explained. Yet, the longing for a space of his own, where he can live more freely and authentically, persists. Living with his parents reinforces expectations of obedience and imposes subtle but significant limits on his ability to express and further explore his identity fully.

Krishna, on the other hand, sees physical distance, specifically emigration, as path to emotional liberation. He shared:

“So, I'm trying to move to Australia. That's what I've been working on. So, if I go there, at least I could just avoid this kind of pressure. (...) Australia, it's a gay-friendly country. So, I can get, like, partners, maybe good friends. And I don't have to pretend” (Krishna 2024: Transcript 1).

Krishna’s aspiration to reside in a foreign country is driven by the hope that it will liberate him from hiding his identity. For him, the possibility of living authentically as a gay person exists, but only beyond the confines of his family home – which he described as deeply heteronormative and focused on preserving social status – and ultimately, outside the country itself.

Together, these accounts demonstrate the importance but also the ambivalent role of family in the lives of GBQ individuals. While the family sphere can offer emotional grounding, care, stability, and a sense of belonging, it can also impose constraints through silence, rigid expectations, and pressures to conform. Family therefore emerges as both a source of support and a barrier to self-expression – its impact varying in intensity from one individual to another.

Marriage Pressure

In the lives of many GBQ individuals in Nepal, marriage often emerges as a difficult site of negotiation between personal identity and societal expectation. Within a cultural framework where heterosexual marriage is not only seen as a personal milestone but also as a familial and social duty, GBQ individuals frequently encounter pressure to conform. The expectation to enter a heterosexual union remains deeply entrenched, regardless of a person’s sexuality. 7 participants in this study (Ajit, Bikram, Binod, Dhirendra, Krishna, Sabin and Shreya) reported experiencing some form of marital pressure from their immediate and/or extended family members. One participant, Anil, had faced such pressures in the past but is now married to a man and has found acceptance. These experiences underscore how deeply rooted the expectation of marriage in Nepali society is, where forming a family through heterosexual union continues to be seen as a normative life trajectory.

Dhirendra's narrative highlights the complex and emotionally taxing ways in which this pressure comes to bear. He is subject to both implicit and explicit expectations from his father to marry a woman. Suggestions about potential brides are brought up in conversation, often framed as innocent recommendations or casual remarks. In response, Dhirendra navigates the situation with humour and indirectness, posing questions like, "wait, was that a son or a daughter?" (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 3.2), to signal his homosexuality without direct confrontation. These attempts, or hints/clues as he called them, are usually dismissed or interpreted as jokes, revealing the limits of what can be said or heard within his family. By giving such subtle clues, expressing disinterest and critique in the concept of marriage, as well as hypothetically referring to attraction to men, Dhirendra attempts to carve out space for his identity without directly naming it (see *ibid.*: Transcript 1.2, 3.2). However, the consistent denial and lack of serious engagement from his parents underscore a broader tension. As he reflected:

"[E]ven if your child is of other diverse sexuality, not straight, they would still, parents would still want their child to marry anyway at the end, like, have a straight relationship, and I think that's where the problem also comes in" (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 3.3).

For Dhirendra, this dynamic illustrates not only the familial but also the societal insistence on heterosexual marriage as a non-negotiable norm. It underscores the emotional burden imposed on those expected to conform to his ideal which does not align with his identity. As a result, GBQ individuals are often compelled to silence essential parts of their identity to preserve familial harmony.

Binod also experienced the pressure to marry within a heteronormative framework. His narrative reveals a complex interplay of familial expectations, societal assumptions, and inner conflict that he continually navigates. For instance, his mother recently advised him to "find a good girl in the States who is also Nepali" (Binod 2024: Transcript 1), suggesting not only an expectation of heterosexual marriage but also the desire to maintain cultural continuity through such union. Further Binod shared, that the societal narrative surrounding marriage is so entrenched that people around him speak with certainty about his future wife, complimenting him by saying, "your wife's gonna be super lucky because you work a lot (...) do household" (*ibid.*) or "it's tough to find a girl who is as good-looking as he is" (*ibid.*). While Binod acknowledges these remarks to a certain extent, also feeling flattered sometimes, he experiences an inner conflict. He is aware that he is unlikely to marry a woman and conform to familial and societal expectations. He wishes he could say this aloud, yet the burden of expectation compels him to remain silent (see *ibid.*). The fact that he is praised for qualities linked to normative

masculinity, even though knowing they do not reflect his future, adds to the emotional complexity of navigating identity within such social constraints.

Ajit also moves in a sphere of growing familial expectations and internal tension. With both his siblings already being married, the focus has shifted to him. Nowadays, his mother gently encourages him to think about marrying soon. His father also holds clear expectations of a heterosexual union. Although the pressure is not yet forceful, Ajit anticipates that it will intensify over time. Ajit shared:

“I know the topic of marriage will be coming, because it has already started coming since both of my other siblings have got married and they have their own family. And my mother especially wants me to get married now, but she is not urging me to get married. But she asks me to think of getting married soon. (...) I am just dosing my mom's expectations. I know, there will be coming those days where they will be forcing me to get married. I may even have to tell them that I am queer and that I am only interested into men. (...) but then again, my father also has expectations that he would see me getting married with a woman” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

Ajit manages expectations by deflecting or postponing the conversation, often saying he does not intend to marry at all. This strategy allows him to avoid immediate confrontation while shielding his parents from potential hurt. Ajit finds himself in a dilemma, as he does not want to disappoint his family, but also longs to live authentically.

Shreya's experience with marriage pressure reflects the deep entanglement of family expectations, heteronormativity, and the belief that a woman's stability and success are best secured through marriage. At one point, her parents nearly arranged her marriage to a French Navy officer, seven years older than her, who was deemed a good match due to his stable income and respectable profession. Shreya shared:

“I was supposed to get married to a guy who was seven years older than me. One of the reasons why they wanted me to marry that guy was because he was a French Navy. He was settled, he was earning well. So, they were okay with me marrying someone who was seven years older than me that I had not even known for a month or so” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 2).

This arrangement was not only motivated by social status and economic security but also by a longstanding obligation between the two families. Although Shreya initially went along with the idea of getting married to him, she ultimately withdrew after he expressed the desire to start a family soon, something she was uncertain about, as she wanted to study first. Her parents accepted her decision at the time. Nevertheless, the experience of the arranged marriage was a significant reason Shreya chose to move to Kathmandu for her studies. Still today, the pressure

to marry has not disappeared. Shreya noted that her mother remains fixated on marriage, seeing it as the pursuit of life and the only viable path to stability. Her mother's concerns revolve not around Shreya's independent career or aspirations for her future, but her unmarried status. In her eyes, successful life equates to becoming a wife, as this reflects her own life trajectory (see *ibid.*: Transcript 1). This persistent idealisation of marriage as a woman's ultimate achievement fosters an emotional environment in which Shreya feels pressured and misunderstood. Reflecting on her experience, she stated: "I was manipulated into it because marriage is such a big deal especially in South Asian families" (*ibid.*: Transcript 2). Her narrative highlights the deeply rooted cultural centrality of marriage in Nepalese society.

Like Shreya, Krishna experiences persistent pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations around marriage. However, while Shreya sought distance by moving from Pokhara to Kathmandu, Krishna expresses a strong desire to leave the country to escape societal and familial demands. He reflected, "a lot of people here, they get married because of their family pressure" (Krishna 2024: Transcript 1) and admitted to fabricating stories about a fictitious girlfriend to deflect growing expectations. The emotional strain of having to continuously lie to his family underscores how deeply entrenched marriage norms shape not only his present reality but also his aspirations for the future.

Bikram's experience highlights a more nuanced relationship with marriage pressure, as he does not face overt demands to marry. However, indirect questioning, particularly from distant relatives or friends who are unaware of his sexual orientation, still persist. Unlike earlier in his life, he nowadays feels equipped to handle such remarks with confidence and clarity. He explained:

"So, there is not much pressure, but I still get that kind of questioning, let's say, from my distant relatives, or even friends who do not know about, who I am not open yet. So, I think it's okay. I know how to handle those questions. It used to bother me a lot when growing up, but not anymore" (Bikram 2024: Transcript 1).

Rather than feeling compelled to conform, Bikram, similar to Dharendra, critically questions the institution of marriage itself, particularly in light of how many people – queer or not – end up in unwanted unions. He places emphasis on personal agency and emotional readiness, rejecting external expectations in favour of self-determined choices. He shared:

"So, my response would be, you know, I would only marry when I'm sure about, because it's my life and it's my decisions, and it's going to change my whole life course, so it has to be me, not any other forces, you know? So, I take their suggestion with due respect, but I'm not going to follow that" (Bikram 2024: Transcript 1).

His stance reflects a shift away from the pressure to conform and toward a more empowered perspective, where marriage is not cultural mandate but a personal reflective choice.

Like Bikram, Sabin offers an alternative, hypothetical approach of navigating marriage expectations. Influenced by depictions in Hindi films, he once had the idea in mind of marrying a lesbian woman as a strategy to outwardly conform to heteronormative standards while privately preserving his own way of life more aligned with his identity. As he put it: “Maybe, I can marry a lesbian? (...) In that way, my life would be easier” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2). This idea highlights the extent to which GBQ individuals may consider strategic compromises to negotiate societal demands and personal agency. Sabin’s idea would also align with *xinghun* in China, in which a marriage between a gay man and a lesbian woman is arranged to meet societal and familial expectations, while maintaining same-sex relationships in private (see Huang, Brouwer 2018: 107f).

These narratives collectively reveal how deeply embedded the institution of heterosexual marriage remains within Nepali society and how it continues to structure the life trajectories expected of individuals, regardless of their sexual or gender identities. For many GBQ individuals, marriage becomes a site of silent negotiation, strategic avoidance, or internal conflict, marked by emotional labour, familial expectations, and societal surveillance. While some participants resist or reframe these pressures through humour, postponement, or imagined compromises, others are compelled to silence or even moving away as means of escape.

4.3.3 Becoming Oneself – Stages of Gay, Bisexual and Queer (GBQ) Identity Development

All participants of this study have moved – and continue to move – through an ongoing process of sexual identity development. The participants’ journeys are deeply personal yet also shaped by broader social structures, cultural expectations, and interpersonal interactions. In analysing the narratives under scrutiny, I draw upon two key theoretical frameworks and bring them into dialogue: D’Augelli’s (1994a, 1994b) model of lesbian, gay and bisexual identity development and Rosenberg’s (2018) more recent reconceptualization of queer identity development.

D’Augelli’s (1994a, 1994b) approach emphasises that the lesbian, gay and bisexual identity development is not a linear nor a universal process, but one shaped by social contexts and relational interactions. The framework highlights key phases such as the disownment of reassumed heterosexual identity that encompasses the re-labelling of oneself and the recognition of same-sex desires; the development of a LGB identity status through gaining knowledge about LGBTQIA+ topics by interacting with other queer individuals; the

development of a LGB social status that involves the establishment of supportive social connections (both within queer communities and families); the disclosure to parents which D'Augelli framed as 'becoming a LGB offspring; the formation of a lesbian, gay and/or bisexual intimacy status and the final process 'entering the LGB community' which entails engaging with broader queer networks through political and social action (see *ibid.* 1994a: 319).

Building upon and critiquing earlier models, Rosenberg (2018) offered an even more fluid, non-linear conceptualisation of queer identity development, which she framed as "sexual self-discovery journeys of young, LGBT+/queer people" (see *ibid.*: 1788). Her conceptualisation underscores the ongoing, never-ending nature of the process, which is shaped by intersecting personal and structural influences. This approach delineates four overlapping phases: The first phase, 'searching for identity', refers to the emergence of queer feelings and desires; the second phase, 'society, stigma and self', highlights the impact of social messages and internalised norms; the third phase, 'sexual self-discovery', is defined as the active realisation and naming of one's desires; the fourth phase, 'coming in', is characterised as a process of internal alignment and self-embrace, which may or may not be accompanied by outward disclosure (coming out) (see *ibid.*).

In addition to these two frameworks, I also draw to some extent on the conceptualisation of identity proposed by Jones and McEwen (2000), who emphasised on the multidimensional and intersectional nature of identity formation. Their approach situates identity within a broader social framework and recognises it as fluid and dynamic shaped by the interplay of various factors such as gender, ethnicity, caste and more. (see *ibid.*).

Even though the process of GBQ identity development among the participants of this study is highly individual and deeply personal – with each participant having experienced it in distinct and nuanced ways – it is nevertheless possible to identify shared development stages that resonate with the frameworks proposed by D'Augelli and Rosenberg. The participants' narratives reflect and extend the insights of both models, illustrating that sexual identity development is neither linear nor uniform, but contingent upon complex interactions between personal agency, social structures, and relational dynamics. Their experiences demonstrate how social expectations, familial relationships, and access to queer communities mediate the processes of self-recognition, exploration, and acceptance.

Inspired by D'Augelli's and Rosenberg's models, I developed a phase-based analytical structure that suites the specificities of my collected data, while maintaining an intersectional perspective as outlined by Jones and McEwen (2000). Rather than applying the models mechanically, I used

them as conceptual guides to frame the diverse paths of sexual identity development of my participants, taking into account the intersecting influences of economic status, dis/ability, caste, ethnicity or other dimensions, if these were recognisable in my data.

The stages are: ‘Searching for identity’: Early feelings of difference; ‘prediscursive queerness’: First queer desires/realising sexual orientation; ‘gaining queer-related knowledge’; ‘finding support/building community’; ‘formation of GBQ intimacy’; ‘coming in’: Acceptance, embracement, empowerment. Although these stages of sexual identity development are presented below in a sequential manner, it is important to emphasise that this sequence should not be interpreted as indicating a linear and universally applicable process. Rather, the stages may arise at different times in the lives of the participants, occur simultaneously, and interact with or condition one another.

In the following, I draw upon excerpts from my interviews to show how the developed stages help to articulate the phases of sexual identity development among my participants. Through this approach, I illustrate how the participants in this study negotiate their identities – often by either adapting or challenging, resisting, or reconfiguring normative expectations of gender and sexuality in the Nepali context. By tracing these trajectories, the complex, dynamic and socially embedded notion of GBQ identity formation is brought to light.

‘Searching for Identity’: Early Feelings of Difference

An early stage of my participants GBQ identity development involves the early recognition of being somehow different, which is framed as ‘searching for identity’. This stage becomes concrete in the lived experiences of most of the participants.

Anil recollected early childhood feelings of being different. With them he shed light on the beginnings of his sexual identity journey:

“I started realizing that I’m different and if you’re different, you have to either stand up for yourself. You have to, in a way, give in and integrate. Or you have to be so isolated that the world around you doesn’t bother (...). Of course, because you are different, you tend to think like, is this right or is this wrong? (...) I never rejected myself” (Anil 2024: Transcript 1).

Anil recollected an early awareness of being ‘different’ and not conforming to the societal norms. Even though he did not perceive himself as atypical, nor did he reject his emerging identity, he experienced considerable pressure to either conform to prevailing norms, withdraw in isolation, or actively resist societal expectations in his childhood and adolescence. Anil’s account exemplifies how early recognition of difference instigates a complex negotiation between self-perception and external societal pressures. This early awareness of nonconformity

is not unique to Anil but is echoed across the narratives of several other participants. For instance, Dharendra similarly described early childhood feelings of being different, even questioning his gender identity at times:

“Even when I was a child, I could sense that I was a little bit different than my friends in terms what I used to like, what I used to (...) share with my friends. And, for example, when you’re watching a TV, then you like the guy more than a girl in terms of attraction (...) when I was a child, I used to think (...), I’m a girl” (Dharendra 2024: Transcript 1.1).

Likewise, Aahan, who nowadays resides in Kathmandu Valley, but grew up in a remote area in southern Nepal (Chitwan), recounted experiencing a strong sense of not belonging during his teenage years. This was marked not only by early feelings of being different regarding his sexuality, but also by multiple intersecting challenges that shaped his identity formation in his teenage years and led to feelings of isolation and loneliness. His narrative highlights how emotional, financial, and educational struggles compounded his emerging sense of feeling different and his emerging queer self-awareness. Reflecting on this period, Aahan shared:

“So, when I finished my 10th, then I got a scholarship, and I went to a college where everything was in English. So, for the first time, I was learning (...) in English. Throughout my life, I never studied that. So, that was a challenge, and I lost my confidence there. (...) So, that degradation, also the financial problem, also my hormones, (...) increasing, me starting to (...) catch feeling for straight guys. (...) But financially and emotionally, teenage years were the worst ones” (Aahan 2024: Transcript 1).

Further compounding these difficulties was the lack of access to a queer community and of social support during his upbringing. He reflected: “But back then, I didn’t have a phone. (...) I never had a gay friend, like honestly, because I didn’t find anyone in the village. (...) I was lonely at that time” (ibid.). This omnipresent sense of isolation reinforced Aahan’s feelings of alienation and the belief that he was alone in his experiences. He recalled: “But now, I think back, actually, that also will harm your psyche, (...) like to think that you’re the only one” (ibid.). Aahan’s account illustrates that his early struggles with identity were not confined to the personal recognition of same-sex desires, but were deeply intertwined by external factors, including financial instability, educational marginalisation, and limited access to queer social networks. His experiences underline the necessity for an intersectional understanding of identity development. Identity is a social construct and that is shaped by the interplay of multiple intersecting factors, as emphasised by Jones and McEwen (2000).

Similarly, Anush's early experiences with feelings of being different compared to his surrounding were shaped not solely by the emergence of same-sex desires, but also by numerous intersecting dimensions of marginality. Growing up disabled within an orphanage, he encountered social exclusion and internal confusion. His narrative illustrates how early feelings of not conforming were exacerbated by additional factors, including disability and a sense of alienation from familial belonging. This underscores the intricate, intersecting dynamics that were already formative for his identity development during childhood. Anush's narratives show how his homosexuality was, from the outset, inseparably intertwined with other axes of vulnerability and structural marginalisation:

"I was raised in an orphanage, and it was a bit difficult for me to go through all the process. Because I was small, and also, I was in an orphanage, and I could not understand myself, with my emotions and feelings. And besides that, I was being a disabled. (...) it was so challenging for myself to understand why I'm different than other people, other, you know, the friends in that orphanage. Being a disabled and identifying, like, feminine was so different at that moment" (Anush 2024: Transcript 1).

Anush's account clearly illustrates that the process of 'searching for identity' was not only tied to his sexual orientation but was linked to other structural conditions of difference, demonstrating the significance of an intersectional lens when examining identity development experiences.

The narratives collectively demonstrate that the participants' early search for identity was shaped by feelings of being somehow different from their surroundings, but also by intersecting social, structural, and relational factors, underscoring the need for an intersectional lens when analysing GBQ identity development.

'Prediscursive Queerness': First Queer Desires/Realising Sexual Orientation

The next phase is termed 'prediscursive queerness'. It is characterised based on the fact that all participants reported experiences of same-sex attraction during their childhood or early adolescence – long before they had any formal knowledge of non-heteronormative sexualities. This was often accompanied by emotional confusion and the absence of terminology to understand themselves.

The term 'prediscursive queerness' is employed to refer to these initial feelings that emerged prior to the participants' engagement with prevailing social and cultural discourses surrounding queerness. The idea of framing this phase as such draws upon Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not an innate essence, but a performance shaped by

social norms and expectations (see Butler 1988; 1990 [1999]). Queer Theory, drawing on Butler's work, further challenges the fixed categories of gender and sexuality, highlighting their fluid and socially constructed nature (see chapter 2.1). Michel Foucault claimed that the notion of the 'prediscursive' refers to realities – including bodies, events, and practices – that exist prior to and outside of language and cultural representations (see Foucault 1972; Tiisala 2024: 55f). Utilising these theoretical foundations, 'prediscursive queerness' suggests that there can be a sense of queer experience that precedes independently of an individual's exposure to or understanding of queer-related discourse. Accordingly, the participants of this study described that queer identity manifested prior to their acquisition of the language, concepts, or cultural frameworks typically used to define queerness.

The phase 'prediscursive queerness' is also indebted to Rosenberg's (2018) initial phase, entitled 'searching for identity', which pertains to the early emergence of queer feelings and desires and the phase 'sexual self-discovery' that denotes the acknowledgement of one's sexual desires. Furthermore, it resonates with D'Augelli's (1994a, 1994b) phase of the disownment of presumed heterosexual identity and the recognition of same-sex desires. Together, these theoretical models provide a framework for understanding the participant's early experiences of queerness.

The stage of 'prediscursive queerness' becomes evident in Anush's narrative:

“[I]t was in my orphanage. And there was a question mark going on with myself as well. But I was very attractive towards the boys. (...) I think, [I was] nine or ten, probably then, maybe around teenage time. (...) And even at that time, I proposed to one guy. Two times, actually, I proposed to him. I liked him so much. And I said: “I like you. I don't know why, but I like you” (Anush 2024: Transcript 1).

Anush noticed the emergence of feelings towards boys around the age of nine or ten. Despite his young age and the absence of a conceptual or linguistic framework to comprehend his emotions, he actively expressed his affection, even proposing to a boy to whom he was attracted to. This recollection exemplifies the emergence of queer desire prior to the acquisition of queer knowledge.

A similar dynamic becomes apparent in Bikram's narrative, further illustrating the stage of 'prediscursive queerness'. During his early teenage years, Bikram began to experience emotional and romantic attractions towards other boys, marking the beginning of his recognition of his non-heterosexual orientation. He reflected:

“Because I knew that I was a bit different than my other peers, especially my friends and all. But I wasn't sure what it was. Later in my life (...) I realized about my sexuality when I started my exploration time and all (...). Because during those early

teenage [years], that is the time you realize, okay, what are you more attracted to? (...) I must have been in grade 7 or 8. (...) I started to have that emotional and social attraction, connection with your peers, and even in your classroom” (Bikram 2024: Transcript 1).

And further he recalled:

“I think, it was when I was in grade 8, 9. (...) he’s married now, (...) we used to be best friends, he was not in my class, he was a senior, but we used to spend a lot of time together (...) so we were really, really close. And I’m pretty sure that that was my first romantic attraction, let’s say, towards another person of same gender. So maybe that’s why also I realized, you know, I’m gay” (Bikram 2024: Transcript 1).

Bikram’s narrative underscores the role that emotional intimacy and romantic attachment during adolescence played in his realisation regarding his sexual orientation. His experiences, prior to the emergence of knowledge about queerness, exemplify how queer desires can manifest in the everyday emotional and social development of youth.

Shreya’s experiences similarly reflect the phase of ‘prediscursive queerness’. From an early age, she experienced emotional and romantic attachments towards female classmates and actresses; however, she did not immediately label these feelings as queer or significant. As she commented:

“I always knew I was attracted to women, but then I never felt, I was anything different. I mean, I did, but it did not bother me as much as it does now, because I never felt identity was such a big deal” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 2).

Her first serious romantic attraction was directed towards a senior female student at school, an experience that, in retrospect, revealed her emerging non-heteronormative orientation. Shreya provided the following account:

“I was crazily obsessed with this one senior. And she was very pretty, okay? And what I felt was, I felt sort of jealousy when I saw different boys trying to hit on her, and it made me feel like, maybe I was just trying to protect her and nothing more than that. I never thought that I was romantically attracted to her” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 2).

During her high school years (grades 11 and 12) Shreya began to engage more consciously with her sexuality, supported by increased access to the internet and online resources. She described how online quizzes and broader media representations contributed to her process of questioning her sexuality. Despite being in a heterosexual relationship at that time, Shreya acknowledged to herself and her partner that her attractions extended beyond heterosexual norms and that she felt attracted not only to men but also to women (see *ibid.*). In further reflection on her experiences, Shreya emphasised the role that the absence of accessible language and inclusive

education contributed to the difficulties she faced in articulating her sexual identity. Her narrative exemplifies a key aspect of ‘prediscursive queerness’, namely the existence of queer feelings prior to the acquisition of the vocabulary necessary for their proper naming. She told:

“I think I never knew about the labels. I knew that I was not just attracted to men, but I did not know that I was bisexual. It was hard for me to label myself at first because I did not feel it was necessary. Also, because I think I had no awareness about it. (...) Out syllabus does not cover these things. Even still now, the school courses are not very inclusive. And so young people do not know about this. Most of the time they are bullied for being feminine or being masculine and putting on make-up or not putting on make-up. So, I think that narrative is also what kept me grounded or maybe kept me restricted” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 2).

Shreya’s account highlights how early queer desires often remain unexpressed, unrecognised and unacknowledged, for example due to the absence of affirming cultural narratives, accessible terminology, and inclusive educational curricula. Her experience illustrates ‘prediscursive queerness’, where queer affectivity and desires exist before structured knowledge, shaping the emotional and social lives of young people navigating the heteronormative structures they live in. As with other participant, this emphasises the importance of ‘prediscursive queerness’ in the development of self-recognition, which is often delayed until greater knowledge and representation become accessible. This process reflects the ways individual identity unfolds amidst broader social transitions like puberty and peer relationships.

‘Gaining Queer-Related Knowledge’

By drawing upon one of D’Augelli’s key phases of his model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development model (1994a, 1994b) – ‘developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status’ – I identified the phase of ‘gaining queer-related knowledge’ in my collected data. 8 of 10 participants described ‘gaining queer-related knowledge’ as a key aspect in their journey towards understanding their sexual identity. From their accounts, it became evident that from adolescence onwards, most participants actively seek information regarding queer-related topics, whether through the internet, media, or by establishing connections with queer organisations. Many participants encountered terms such as ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’ or ‘queer’ only later, despite having already experienced attractions and feelings associated with these labels. However, they were not yet able to name these feelings, as described in the section above. This process of acquiring knowledge proved to be an important factor in mitigating confusion and fostering greater self-acceptance, thereby signifying a central milestone in their individual sexual identity development.

Sabin's narrative serves as a clear example of the significance of 'gaining queer-related knowledge'. It was during an English lesson at the age of 15 that he first encountered terminology that resonated with his own feelings when the word 'gay' was discussed within the context of linguistic evolution. Sabin shared:

"But I learned the word gay, when I was in grade 9, I remember specifically there was this English class, and my teacher was talking about the word. He was explaining that how gay which means joy and happiness has changed and now refers to homosexuality and at that point I understood that I was what that meant. I was, I think, 15 years old, when I started learning what I should identify myself as" (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2).

This moment marked a pivotal transition for Sabin as he finally gained the ability to use a term that expressed his feelings, which contributed significantly to the development of his gay identity. Sabin's experience shows that acquisition of queer-related knowledge contributes to reducing confusion and fostering early stages of self-recognition and acceptance.

While Sabin's encounter with queer terminology occurred within a relatively neutral educational setting, Dhirendra's first exposure to the word 'gay' was framed in a way that reflected social stigmas often attached to queer identities. The term was introduced to Dhirendra during his school years, where it was employed not as a neutral descriptor, but rather as an insult. He recalled:

"But when it comes to my school days, I (...) go in front of the class and just dance (...), and I think most of my friends were okay with that, and even my teachers used to have fun (...). I mean, there definitely used to be a couple of my friends who used to pass on comments, like saying (...) that's so gay and stuff like that, and mostly you would, when you are a child, relate that as an insult, as something very negative, which I now realize it's not. It's just a sexual orientation, that is. But during that time, I actually heard the word gay itself from my friends, and then came to know about what that meant by saying that it was not like a revelation to me that I was gay at the time, but just that awareness or just coming to know that word was when that was being commented on me by a few of my friends" (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 1.1).

In a later interview, which emphasises the above narrative, he explained further:

"And it was around that time [during puberty] (...) that I was being introduced to the word gay by my friends as well. So, it always felt like an insulting word to me and not something that's positive" (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 2).

Such early encounters, marked by stigmatisation, shaped Dhirendra's internalised perceptions of queerness. Beyond peer interactions, the school environment further reinforced negative associations with queerness. Additionally, Dhirendra provided an account of a formative

experience in a Health and Population (HP) class, where misinformation and moral judgement were explicitly conveyed by his teacher:

“I remember one time (...), when one of my teachers was teaching this subject called health and population. (...) And there was this chapter about STIs (...), sexually transmitted diseases. And (...) how he started the class was kind of strange, now that I think about it, he was (...) talking about how AIDS was, like, you know, a thing. And he was just talking about (...) when a man had sexual intercourse with a chimpanzee and stuff like that. Until that, he used to feel it was okay. (...) But when he said, like, you know, I hope none of you here is gay or (...) something like this because that is bad. When he said that, I already had in mind that, okay, so being gay or anything outside being straight is a bad thing. I already had that thing ingrained on my mind” (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 1.1).

Even though Dhirendra’s internalised understandings of queerness were influenced by early encounters with stigma and misinformation, a gradual shift began to happen during his +2 years²², as an increasing curiosity prompted him to actively seek out information about queer-related topics. He described:

“I feel (...), the change in me about the word gay happened when I completed my +2 or while the +2 was going on (...). So around that time, I used to have curiosity about different organizations that work around LGBTQIA+ issues. And then I came to know about Blue Diamond Society. I just used to look at their organization and stuff like that through Google. But I never had that courage to approach them or something like that, because I was just trying to know the existence of other people like me. Or do they even exist? That was a question that I had. (...) Additionally, I think the perception changed when I had access to my own device. After my grade 10, I bought a device on my own, a mobile phone and after that, I got connected with the internet and then I downloaded a gay app, Grindr” (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 2).

In addition to researching PoMSOGIESC+ organisations such as BDSN, Dhirendra explored online platforms such as Grindr. Furthermore, he consumed movies that showcased LGBTQIA+ portrayals. Although many of these representations were negative, these depictions nevertheless confirmed the existence of other queer individuals like him. That contributed to his gradual redefinition of himself (see *ibid.*: Transcript 2). Exposure to queer friends and online resources played an essential role in normalising his understanding of being gay. Dhirendra’s experience thus provides a compelling illustration of how the acquisition of queer-related

²² The +2 years are equivalent to the 11th and 12th grade.

knowledge, despite initial encounters with stigmatisation and misinformation, has the capacity to critically reshape the trajectory of sexual identity development. This process involves a transition from a state of confusion and stigma to a greater degree of self-acceptance.

Importantly, Dhirendra's engagement with queer-related topics did not end with his personal journey towards self-recognition. In line with D'Augelli's (1994a, 1994b) stage of 'entering the LGB community', which entails commitment to political and social action, Dhirendra has transformed his experience of stigmatisation into active engagement in knowledge production and community empowerment. Presently, he is engaged in efforts to broaden access to queer-related information in Nepal through his involvement with Queer Youth Group. Among other initiatives, he has been involved in the creation of accessible educational resources, including the co-authorship of a book on SOGIESC²³ aimed at young audiences. The objective is to produce materials in comprehensible language, as opposed to technical academic jargon, and to disseminate them freely across a range of organisations, civil society groups, schools, and libraries in 13 languages (see Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 2). By contributing to QYG, Dhirendra actively participates in reshaping the landscape of queer-related knowledge, making it more inclusive, accessible, and empowering for future generations, thereby addressing the very gaps he encountered during his own formative years.

Similarly to Dhirendra, the internet played a crucial role in 'gaining queer-related knowledge' for Ajit contributing to the development of his gay identity. Through online exploration in cyber cafés, googling terms such as 'men kissing men', he stumbled upon BDSN and queer-related information. That helped him to piece together an understanding of his desires and sexuality. Ajit also used the internet as a medium for self-education on subjects such as MSM, condom use, and HIV prevention – learning essential aspects of sexual health largely through self-directed online exploration (see Ajit 2024: Transcript 2). His narrative highlights the role of digital spaces as essential resources for understanding one's desires and emotions, as well as for accessing health-related information – particularly in contexts where formal education systems lack inclusivity.

'Gaining queer-related knowledge' emerged as a significant step in the GBQ identity development of the participants, enabling them to move from confusion and internalised stigma towards self-recognition and acceptance. Whether through formal education, online exploration, or community networks, access to queer-related information critically shaped their ability to articulate, affirm, and handle their identities.

²³ Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics.

‘Finding Support/Building Community’

Another common stage that emerged among the participants’ GBQ identity development is finding support and building community. This phase is characterised by a significant transition in the participants’ journeys of self-discovery, during which support networks – whether consisting of chosen family, siblings, friends etc. – are central to fostering self-acceptance and empowerment. Across the narratives, it was evident that all participants ultimately established some form of affirming connection, even though such support was not immediately available during their childhood or adolescence. For some participants, relocation to larger cities such as Kathmandu (see Aahan 2024: Transcript 1; Shreya 2024: Transcript 1, 2) or moving abroad (see Anil 2024: Transcript 1; Sabin 2024: Transcript 2), resulted in opportunities to engage with PoMSOGIESC+ communities and spaces where they could more freely explore and express their identities.

This stage is consistent with D’Augelli’s (1994a, 1994b) emphasis on the establishment of supportive social connections as a key dimension of queer identity development. The experiences of the participants indicate that establishing a sense of community and receiving support, even from non-queer allies such as siblings, cousins, or friends, is frequently instrumental in developing resilience and affirming one’s sense of self. For Ajit, this affirmation emanated from his immediate family, specifically his sister and brother, who not only accepted his sexuality but also actively supported and encouraged him to live authentically. He described their relationship as a source of emotional confidence, noting that their openness toward topics such as sex, sex education, HIV, and sex work, created a uniquely sex-positive and non-judgemental environment (see Ajit 2024: Transcript 2, 3). His experiences highlight how familial support can serve as a stabilising anchor, particularly in contexts where queer identities are frequently met with silence and rejection.

The significance of ‘finding support/building community’ is also illustrated by the narrative of Shreya, whose experiences underscore the central role of relational support in the process of GBQ identity formation. Drawing on D’Augelli’s emphasis of establishing supportive social connections to develop a LGB status, Shreya’s account illustrates how the sense of belonging and affirmation from trusted others can enable greater self-acceptance. Shreya found a key source of emotional support in her younger sister, who also self-identifies as bisexual. Their shared experiences of navigating queerness established a strong bond between them, thereby offering Shreya a sense of solidarity during times of insecurity and self-questioning. She reflected: “I think the only person who was there for me emotionally, when I needed someone to be there for me was my sister” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 1). In addition to her sister’s support,

Shreya developed a safe and affirming relationship with her boyfriend, who is also part of the PoMSOGIESC+ community, that helped her feel secure and validated (see *ibid.*: Transcript 2). After moving to Kathmandu, she further expanded her support network by finding queer spaces and building a small but trusted circle of queer and queer-friendly friends. She described this as a turning point in feeling more at home with herself:

“I only found good friends after I joined my bachelors [in Kathmandu]. I really have a small group. These are the people I can go up to and talk to anytime. (...) I am really happy that I found these people” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 1).

Additionally, she later stated in our second interview:

And the reason why I moved to Kathmandu was also because I knew how conservative my parents were and I did not want to live there. And I did not want to restrict myself with so many possibilities that I could have explored. I think being queer and my queer identity was also one of the things I explored after I came to Kathmandu. (...) I think after I came to Kathmandu because I found a lot of queer spaces and I found people who were just like me. I think this is where I have felt most comfortable” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 2).

Shreya’s account underlines how the presence of GBQ individuals, communities and spaces not only contributed to an environment of emotional safety, but also enabling her to embrace her queer identity.

Krishna’s narrative further illustrates, the establishment of emotionally affirming social connections is a pivotal aspect of the development of his homosexual identity. Krishna gradually transitioned from a state of isolation towards meaningful interpersonal relationships by seeking out others who shared similar experiences. At the age of 21, Krishna’s entry into a Facebook group for queer individuals, where many used pseudonyms and fake IDs to protect their anonymity, marked a significant turning point in his journey of identity development. This digital space provided him his first glimpse of a broader homosexual community, engendering a sense of recognition, belonging and hope. He stated: “Oh, my God, there is a world” (Krishna 2024: Transcript 1). It was at this point that he came to the realisation that there is indeed a community of like-minded people, and that he is not alone with his queer desires. Following that, Krishna began to form offline friendships with other gay men, with whom he experienced a sense of solidarity and increased understanding. These relationships provided a level of emotional resonance and mutual support that his university peer group lacked. He gave the following reflection: “I’ve made a few gay friends. And it’s just completely... I enjoy that way so much. Like, it feels so much better than hanging out with my university friends” (Krishna 2024: Transcript 1).

He further shared, that he built friendships with closeted gay men, like him, who manage their homosexual identities discreetly within a heteronormative environment, which again underlines, that he resonates more with his queer friends than with his university peers:

“And I have some friends. They act straight at home, but they are completely gay.

But still, I have two friends who are very good to me. And we hang out for a drink most of the time. So, it's a good thing. That's why I enjoy hanging out with those friends rather than my university friends” (Krishna 2024: Transcript 1).

Looking ahead, Krishna expressed the hope that moving abroad – particularly to a more accepting country like Australia – would allow him to live more openly and authentically regarding his sexuality. He associates with Australia the presence of a visible and supportive queer community, in contrast to the constraints he experiences in Nepal. As he elucidates:

“So, (...) in Australia, it's, it's a gay-friendly country. So, I can get (...) partners, maybe good friends. And I don't have to pretend. When I'm with straight friends, I have to pretend every time. So, it's not nice” (Krishna 2024: Transcript 1).

Krishna's narrative demonstrates how the establishment of connections within the PoMSOGIESC+ community, both online and offline, were not only more fulfilling than his heteronormative circles, but also contributed to a sense of belonging and emotional validation. This process ultimately facilitated his transition from isolation to a more grounded and relational sense of self within a community characterised by shared understanding.

The importance of having supportive social connections is further emphasised in Binod's narrative. The disclosure to his former girlfriend resulted in an unexpectedly supportive and open conversation, which provided him with a safe space to articulate and explore his feelings. He recollected their hours-long exchange as a moment of important emotional validation, which helped him feel less alone in his uncertainty regarding his sexual identity. Binod finds further support among his Nepali friends from social science backgrounds, who do not question or pathologize his femininity (see Binod 2024: Transcript 1). These relationships have been crucial in helping him to express himself more authentically, feel seen and accepted, thus making them a central element in the development of his sexual and gendered self-understanding.

When considered as a whole, these narratives demonstrate that the establishment of emotionally affirming social connections – whether with peers, allies, family members, or digital communities – play a vital role in the development of GBQ sexual identity. Also, Rosenberg (2018) presented in her research that “[f]inding other queer people to engage with has been an important aspect of the interviewees' development” (ibid.: 1805) – a statement which aligns to my findings. Several scholars (e.g. Battle, Harris 2013; McCallum, McLaren 2010; Romijnders et al. 2017; Rosenberg 2018) have found that finding supportive community networks and

experiencing a sense of social acceptance and belonging are vital protective factors for the mental health of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Supportive relationships are not only effective for mitigating feelings of isolation and marginalisation, but also serve as catalysts for self-recognition, expression, and resilience as the accounts of my participant have shown. In contexts where prevailing norms frequently impede an open articulation of queerness, the presence of trusted individuals and inclusive spaces becomes essential for providing a sense of belonging, enabling the participant to navigate their identities with greater confidence and emotional safety.

‘Formation of GBQ Intimacy’

Another significant phase identifies in the GBQ identity development of the study’s participants again draws on D’Augelli’s (1994a, 1994b) model of lesbian, gay and bisexual identity development as well as on Rosenberg’s (2018) study on sexual self-discovery of queer individuals. The stage ‘formation of gay, bisexual, and queer intimacy’ refers to experiences of same-sex and queer romantic and/or sexual connection, ranging from physical intimacy and emotional bonding to the establishment of romantic relationships. This phase constitutes an important milestone in developing a queer sense of self as it reflects the crucial role of intimacy in the formation of one’s sexual identity. Through physical and emotional intimacy, my participants learned about their pleasures and emotions. For several participants, the initial intimate encounters took place during adolescence or early adulthood, frequently signifying both: A continuation of and a deviation from prior stages of internal questioning, self-recognition, and community-seeking.

While not all participants provided detailed insights into their intimate lives, those who did frequently described their early romantic and sexual experiences as emotionally complex, marked by a mix of excitement, fear, secrecy, and longing. It is also noteworthy that some participants underscored the role of emotional connection over physical gratification in shaping the meaning and significance of intimate encounters. In this chapter, I explore how participants’ experiences of intimacy through sexual exploration, romantic relationships, and/or the formation of emotional bonds served not only as moments of personal discovery, but also as crucial in their GBQ identity development.

Ajit’s first sexual experience occurred around the age of 14 or 15 with a man he met online who was considerably older. Despite his underage status and initial trepidation, he reflected enjoying the experience and meeting the person several times. He shared:

“One day I was browsing Facebook and some random person with an anonymous ID texted me, saying: “Are you off for a meet?” (...) I was 14/15, I used to do my +2,

intermediate level study. It was during Dashain (...), he just came in some (...) [street intersection] to take me on his bike. And I was palpitating so bad, and it was actually exciting, and I was nervous, too. (...) he took me to his room. (...) And he just sat by my side, and he just held my hand. I could not resist because I was kind of liking it, but I was nervous. (...) that's when I had the first encounter. I actually liked it. I'm not lying, but it was something I – maybe as a teenager, obviously I was underage, but it was something that I liked. (...) we started meeting often, twice or thrice. (...) But it was something that I loved. I actually loved it. And that's how I explored my gay side sexually (...). I kept it for myself. I don't know, like it was for sex. I liked it, but later in life, after so many years it used to haunt me. I shouldn't have had sex that early, I shouldn't have started having sex that soon. I used to feel that. But sex is something that I actually enjoy” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 2).

Initially, he kept his encounters secret; however, upon later reflection, he critically examined his first same-sex experiences at such a young age, articulating a sense of regret. Simultaneously, he acknowledged that these encounters were crucial in his journey of embracing his sexuality, recognising them as a source of personal enjoyment. His reflections highlight a process of self-awareness and understanding, emphasising that, despite being underage, these experiences contributed to his recognition of sexuality as central to his gay identity development. During his undergraduate years, he continued to explore his sexuality (see *ibid.*: Transcript 2) eventually entering a romantic relationship with a man from Kathmandu (see *ibid.*: Transcript 3). This ongoing exploration, alongside the development of a committed relationship, underlines his evolving self-acceptance and affirmation of his gay identity. Ajit's journey not only reflects an acceptance of his past experiences but also an active, ongoing commitment to understanding and expressing his sexual identity as it continues to unfold.

The 'formation of gay intimacy' for Krishna demonstrates how gaining knowledge and experiences intersect in developing his gay identity. His first physical, sexual encounters in 2018 were largely mechanical and emotionally detached, due to a lack of awareness about pleasure, boundaries, and consent, as he reflects: “[I]f you want to meet people, it was more focused on sexual thing. Like, they were not (...) emotional. It was more fun and then leave and then that's it” (Krishna 2024: Transcript 1). However, he gained better experiences following his encounter with Ken, a British man who served as his sexual mentor. It was through his mentorship that Krishna was introduced to safe sex, consent, and mutual enjoyment. He recalled:

“Before that, I was just thinking, this sex is just... It was really weird sex, so I mean, I didn't know how to have fun. And it was very painful. So, he taught me how to

have pleasure and enjoy sex. And that's good. I learned in so many ways" (Krishna 2024: Transcript 1).

This mentorship not only transformed his personal understanding of gay intimacy but also led him to support others by sharing safe sex, sexual health knowledge via dating apps such as Grindr (see *ibid.*). Through this process, Krishna transitioned from a state of confusion and discomfort regarding sexual intercourse to a more informed and affirming sense of his sexual self. In this sense, intimacy was positioned as both a personal and relational practice grounded in care and consent.

Anush's 'formation of gay intimacy' is emphasised on deep emotional connection, care, and a sense of belonging. His relationship with an older foreign gay man, whom he described as a guardian, partner, and father figure, is one example on how intimate interpersonal relationships can extend beyond romantic or sexual partnership. As Anush explained:

"I wouldn't say I have a boyfriend, but I have a guardian that looks after me because I'm an orphan. And he provides me food in my plate. He gives me a shelter – not sex-wise. But he's my boyfriend, he's my family, he's my father. So, we do not have sex" (Anush 2024: Transcript 1).

This non-sexual yet deeply intimate bond is central to Anush, as it offers him emotional stability, recognition, and belonging to a chosen family. These elements are especially significant given his upbringing in an orphanage and his experiences of marginalisation. His account underlines the importance of emotional intimacy and care as valid and affirming forms of queer relationships.

The phase 'formation of GBQ intimacy' emerged as a significant and identifiable component of GBQ identity development among the participants in this study. It has been shown that intimacy, here defined as sexual experience, emotional bonding, or non-sexual interpersonal closeness, plays a central role in affirming and consolidating a gay, bisexual and queer identity. For many participants, these experiences are a crucial moment, marking a significant shift towards heightened self-awareness regarding their sexuality and emotions. This again aligns with Rosenberg's (2018) findings, where she noted that some of her study's participants "underwent physical experiences with other people in order to begin finding clarity about their sexuality" (*ibid.*: 1803). The sexual and/or emotional encounters allowed my participants to explore their desires, negotiate boundaries, and begin to form a relational understanding of queerness. Whether through Ajit's early sexual exploration, Krishna's mentorship-informed learning about consent and pleasure, and Anush's emotionally anchored queer relationality, intimacy proved to be a deeply meaningful aspect of identity formation.

‘Coming In’: Acceptance, Embracement, Empowerment

The final stage identified in the sexual identity development of my participants is labelled as ‘coming in’. The term is borrowed from Rosenberg’s (2018) conceptualisation of queer identity development, wherein ‘coming in’ is “namely the process of coming to terms and embracing (...) sexuality, and stepping into space where they [her interviewees] felt at one with themselves, even if that sense of self was open to change over time” (ibid.: 1804). By shifting the emphasis away from the conventional narrative of ‘coming out’ that centres on external disclosure and the reactions of others, which is discussed in the subsequent chapter, Rosenberg highlights the deeply personal and ongoing nature of queer self-acceptance. In contrast to coming out, the process of ‘coming in’ is also experienced by those LGBTQIA+ individuals who may choose not to publicly reveal their identity due to social, cultural, or safety-related constraints, and instead prioritise self-understanding and inner empowerment.

Among the participants of this study, this stage emerged as a dynamic process marked by heightened confidence, emotional clarity, empowerment, and more integrated sense of self. For many, self-acceptance was cultivated through access to supportive social networks, queer spaces, and personal relationships that enabled them to express their identities more freely. Some participants expressed this acceptance through forms of visibility and advocacy that manifested in activism, art, education, or becoming role models within and beyond the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Kathmandu Valley. These findings also align with D’Augelli’s (1994a, 1994b) sixth phase of his approach to queer identity development which emphasises entering the LGB community not only as social affiliation but as active engagement with wider political and social structures – further deepening one’s sense of identity and belonging.

The phase of ‘coming in: acceptance, embracement, empowerment’ thus encompasses a movement towards greater self-determination, whereby participants embraced their GBQ identities not simply as inner realisations, but also as sources of strength, creativity, and social engagement.

In Sabin’s narratives his embracement of his sexuality – both internally and externally – becomes particularly evident. In 2014/15, during his early years at university, Sabin began to subtly express his identity through clothing. He started wearing patterned shirts and felt, at the time, bold and rebellious for someone assigned male by society. In a societal context marked by adherence to normative expectation, this act became a personal form of resistance for Sabin. As he described it, there came a point when he thought, “enough is enough” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 1), and he chose to wear what he truly resonated with. This represents an early yet

highly meaningful step in his journey towards coming to terms with his sexuality, by standing up for himself and embracing his individuality.

Despite his subtle embracement through changes in his clothing, most of his adolescent years and early university life, he felt compelled to maintain a façade, he even tried to behave in a more masculine manner (see Sabin 2024: Transcript 2). Following a period of concealment for years, Sabin's time in the UK marked a substantial turning point. In the UK, he experienced a greater sense of autonomy and began expressing himself more freely. Upon returning to Nepal, he made a conscious decision not to fall back into his former patterns of hiding his identity. He reflected:

“[W]hen I decided to come back from United Kingdom to Nepal, I did not want to live the same life that I was living back then when I was younger. In my teens, I was kind of not living. I was not, it was not me. (...) I always had to keep a facade or act differently. But when I was away in the UK, I was kind of (...) being a little more independent in the sense that I was trying to be more of myself. And I was finding myself. So, when I decided to come back, I wanted to be still me” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 3).

Sabin further shared about a close heterosexual friend of his, to whom he shared a special bond. At a certain point in their friendship, Sabin even confessed his feelings for him, which brought them even closer together. During their time together in their undergraduate studies, Sabin and his close friend even tried to conform to societal expectations – such as practicing walking in a more masculine way. Yet, it was through these experiences, and the support of this friend, that Sabin later came to significant moments of self-realisation:

“Now, when I think about it, I'm like: “Oh, that's so wrong”. After doing that, I started valuing my own grace, my own body language. I was more aware; I was more appreciative of my body language after that. At one point I said no. The things that I do, the way that I do that is completely unique and that is my beauty, that is my grace, and I own it. Thanks to him I was able to reflect and accept myself. (...) That was a big maturity, I would say” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2).

Sabin acknowledges his process of embracing himself with a sense of pride, recognising how far he has come in affirming his identity. Instead of fitting into certain heteronormative expectations, he chose to live more openly, embracing his identity through dance performance and clothing:

“I kind of express or I come out everyday with my jewelleries. Sometimes I am very loud with whatever I'm wearing, my earrings or my rings, etc, etc. So that's one way I kind of tell that I'm different. Or even the things that I choose to do, for example, I dance this classical form, which is very graceful. I mean, a lot of straight men also

do this, but that is one of the ways I kind of tell that I am not straight” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 3).

Sabin’s way in coming to terms with his sexuality is strongly interwoven with his artistic practice and his fashion choices which became tools not only of self-expression but of resistance and healing. He shared that while people often look at him differently because of the way he presents himself, he has come to embrace that visibility – stating that he actually enjoys it (see *ibid.*: Transcript 2).

Sabin also offered a reflection on his past traumas, including sexual abuse during his teenage years and the resulting obsessive-compulsive behaviours (OCD). He described how art functioned as a catalyst for healing and self-reconciliation, allowing him to regain agency over his body and identity. This therapeutic relationship with creativity enabled Sabin to transform pain into power, and shame into self-appreciation – especially in relation to his bodily grace. As he explained:

“I joined my university and started making art. I think, after that, my obsessive compulsiveness diminished as well, significantly. (...) Art was healing me. Also, because he was not anymore part of my life, art replaced that. I was in a good place after that (...) 2019, a couple of incidents (...) happened and then my compulsions came back, so it has been 5 years now. And during these years, I kind of went through my childhood and kind of understood what the reason for all of this was. So, I’m kind of still figuring things out, learning to harmonize with myself, my body, listening to my body and understanding it” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2).

This account underlines, that Sabin’s process of ‘coming in’ is ongoing. Despite moments of empowerment and healing, particularly through artistic expression and his work as an art professor, he continues to grapple with lingering effects of past traumas and is still learning to harmonise with his body. Nevertheless, Sabin’s process of ‘coming in’ is reflected in the intentional spaces he creates to fully inhabit his identity, he stated: “I’m making a space where I can be completely myself” (*ibid.*: Transcript 3). He further shared that he now allows himself to be fully and unapologetically authentic – even in front of his students: “I cannot compromise on everything, you know, be something else other than myself as an artist and as an art teacher as the figure for my students” (*ibid.*). His openness seems to be met with respect, as he repeatedly emphasised the close bond he shares with his former (students) during our conversations. Notably, one of his students was even present during our first interview, yet Sabin still spoke candidly about intimate aspects of his life (see *ibid.*: Protocol 1). His self-acceptance has evolved into a form of empowerment, particularly through his visibility and advocacy. He actively seeks to be a representative figure for queer students, stating: “I also

wanted to represent and then kind of speak up for the queer group of students that I have in my university, also. So, you know, I wanted to be a figure for them as well” (ibid.: Transcript 3). His empowerment is further demonstrated through his participation in a Nepali podcast, where he engaged in discourse on queer issues (see ibid.). Today, Sabin sees his identity as strength, asserting his queer identity with pride and purpose. His narratives illustrate that self-acceptance and empowerment are not always tied to complete public disclosure – for instance, he remains undisclosed to his parents – but rather to an internal affirmation rooted in authenticity, self-respect, and agency.

Much like Sabin, Dharendra’s process of ‘coming in’ has unfolded gradually, marked by growing self-acceptance, confidence, and a conscious commitment to living more authentically. Over time, he has developed a growing ease in expressing his identity, especially within queer-affirming workspaces and social circles. His engagement in PoMSOGIESC+ advocacy, including his work at QYG and designing queer-centred events at his current workplace, reflects a growing sense of self-acceptance and -empowerment. This is further expressed through his unapologetic outer embodiment of both masculinity and femininity (see Dharendra 2024: Transcript 2) through choices like wearing earrings or makeup (see ibid.: Transcript 1.2). Yet, his process of coming to terms with his gay identity remains ongoing. Dharendra continues to struggle with internalised homophobia and societal stigmatisation regarding homosexuality (see chapter 4.3.3: *‘Gaining Queer-Related Knowledge’*), particularly regarding his parents to whom he is not disclosed. He shared:

“It’s not as strong as it used to be before. But still a tiny bit. It’s still inside me because there hasn’t been acceptance, or I haven’t been able to tell my parents about it which is something very intriguing to me about my identity or my sexual orientation. So, I feel like I don’t seek validation from them, but still part of me really wants them to accept me for who I am and just not be in denial forever. So, maybe then this internalization that I have. Homophobia. That’s still a little bit in me” (Dharendra 2024: Transcript 2).

This persistent desire for parental acceptance highlights the profound influence of familial relationships on an individual’s identity development, even amidst broader movements (queer social circles and accepting workspaces) towards empowerment and visibility. Despite this unresolved tension, Dharendra’s narratives emphasise the processual notion of ‘coming in’, showing that acceptance is not a fixed endpoint in the development of a person’s sexual identity, but an ongoing, multi-layered practice shaped by relational, social, and cultural contexts.

While Dharendra continues to deal with the challenges of internalised stigma and familial non-disclosure, Aahan’s ‘coming in’ process reflects a different trajectory. His journey is shaped by

full disclosure, performance art – similarly to Sabin – and public expression. His journey towards acceptance and empowerment takes on distinctly performative and entrepreneurial forms. His dedication to drag and queer visibility is not merely a personal breakthrough but also signals his commitment to live openly and creatively in both personal and professional spaces. Aahan’s process of ‘coming in’ has been marked by a growing sense of confidence, openness, and creative expression. He described how coming out of the closet allowed him to surround himself with similarly open, empowered queer individuals. His growing self-acceptance is vividly shown through his drag practice, which began playfully but evolved into a meaningful form of self-empowerment. He explained: “I love doing it and I want to continue it in the future as well. (...) [F]or me, (...) drag is not dressing up or like showing my artistry. It's mostly about reclaiming my femininity and my creativity” (Aahan 2024: Transcript 1). Now recognised as one of Nepal’s most famous drag performers, Aahan views his drag not only as mere performative, entertaining activity, but also as a powerful ongoing embracement of his gay identity. Professionally, he now co-runs a queer travel agency, Queermandu, with two friends – an achievement he attributes to living openly and confidently as a gay man (see *ibid.*).

Similar to Sabin, Dharendra and Aahan, Anush’s process of ‘coming in’ is linked to self-empowerment through PoMSOGIESC+ community engagement. Despite facing discrimination due to his sexuality, disability and being an orphan, he has turned his experience into activism. In 2022, Anush founded the NGO Rainbow Disability Nepal, positioning himself as a pioneer for queer people with disabilities (see Anush 2024: Transcript 1). His journey illustrates the transition from marginalisation to political visibility, where living openly becomes a personal stance and form of resistance.

In contrast to the externally challenged paths of Sabin, Dharendra and Anush, Anil’s account illustrates his ‘coming in’ process as relatively smooth. He never saw his homosexuality as something problematic and described his journey towards self-acceptance as largely untroubled. Living abroad – especially in the U.S. – played a key role in strengthening his self-esteem and independence, allowing him to embrace his sexual identity with confidence (see Anil 2024: Transcript 1).

In summary, the process of ‘coming in’ among my participants reveals that GBQ self-acceptance is not a linear journey, but rather a deeply personal, relational, and often ongoing negotiation of identity, resistance, and empowerment. It became evident that individuals can demonstrate the transformative potency of embracing their sexuality through a variety of means, including art, activism, performance, entrepreneurship, or quiet self-affirmation. These

individuals show that, despite enduring societal constraints, the act of coming to terms with one's sexuality can serve as a significant source of personal strength.

Summary

The sexual identity development processes of the participants in this study broadly align with existing stage models while revealing individual variations shaped by the sociocultural context of Nepal. The GBQ identity development of the participants is a nuanced and non-linear process influenced by the intersection of personal experiences, societal expectations, and varying degrees of awareness and acceptance. The participants described early feelings of being different, often experienced during childhood and adolescence, followed by periods of confusion, exploration and self-realisation. Access to PoMSOGIESC+ community spaces, online resources, supportive and reliable peers were found to be pivotal in fostering acceptance and affirming their GBQ identities. However, the internalisation of societal norms and stigmatisation affect the development of GBQ identity for many participants.

A further stage was identified at which the majority of the participants conceal – or often continue to conceal – their true GBQ identity due to societal and familial constraints. This stage, however, is not explored in detail here, as it is already discussed in chapters 4.3.1 and 4.3.2. Additionally, the process of disclosure/coming out was only briefly touched upon in this chapter. It was not categorised as a distinct phase of GBQ identity development, as it appeared at different points across various phases depending on the participant. A more in-depth analysis of coming out processes, with attention to the participants' social and familial contexts, follows in the next chapter.

4.3.4 Between Coming Out and 'Coming With'

All participants in this study, at some point in their lives, had gone through processes of disclosure – whether to strangers, friends, cousins, siblings, or parents. However, only three (Aahan, Anil and Anush) were fully open about their GBQ identities across familial, and social contexts. The remaining seven individuals (Ajit, Bikram, Binod, Dharendra, Krishna, Sabin and Shreya) continue to conceal their identities in certain areas of their lives. This selective disclosure reflects persistent societal taboos in South Asia, where many LGBTQIA+ individuals refrain from coming out due to fears of discrimination, social alienation, and familial rejection (see Achar, Gopal 2023). In collectivistic societies like Nepal, disclosure is embedded in a broader socio-cultural context in which family loyalty and social cohesion are prioritised over individual autonomy (see chapter 1.3). In such settings, the act of coming out is not simply a matter of personal expression but is often experienced as a potential threat to familial harmony

and social reputation. The risks involved – ranging from emotional manipulation and social exclusion to violence – frequently compel PoMSOGIESC+ individuals to conceal their identities or disclose them selectively (see chapter 2.2).

Most participants first disclosed their identity to close friends, persons they felt romantically and/or physically attracted to, cousins, or siblings, while postponing or avoiding coming out to their parents. This is echoed by D’Augelli and Hershberger’s study (1993), which showed that 73% of participants came out to a friend, whereas only 7% disclosed to their mothers and 1% to fathers (see *ibid.*: 429ff). Similarly, in this study, participants often came out to peers or extended family members, leaving parents either unaware or only partially informed about their gender and sexual identity. Some participants are currently in the process of disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents, while others have no plans to do so. These patterns reveal broader dynamics of trust, vulnerability, and anticipated repercussions within heteronormative family structures, which are outlined in more detail below.

Within this chapter, the varied trajectories of disclosure among the participants are explored, focusing on ‘how’, ‘when’ and ‘to whom’. The analysis draws on classical frameworks of coming out as well as the alternative model ‘coming with’. Rooted in Eurocentric ideals, coming out emphasises individual autonomy, personal expression, and visibility (see Huang, Brouwer 2018: 98). In contrast, several participants in this study followed a different path of disclosure captured by the notion of ‘coming with’, a term introduced by Huang and Brouwer (2018). The process of ‘coming with’ foregrounds the integration of familial and cultural belonging with queer identity, rather than positioning them in opposition.

By highlighting both classical and emergent forms of disclosure, this chapter illustrates how GBQ individuals in Nepal deal with tensions between visibility and familial stability, authenticity and conformity. Within this framework, it explores how the study’s participants navigate the emotional and psychological dimensions of disclosure. The chapter as well gives insights into the spectrum of reactions from their social environments – from rejection, to ambivalence, tolerance and active support. In doing so, the transformative potential of ‘coming with’ as both a complement and an alternative to coming out is highlighted, opening possibilities for gradual negotiation of identity and deeper forms of acceptance within a heteronormative societal setting.

(Initial) Coming Out Experiences: Friends, Persons of Romantic Desires, and Others

For LGBTQIA+ individuals, the act of coming out is a deeply personal and psychologically significant experience. It marks a crucial milestone in the development of their LGBTQIA+ identity and can profoundly shape mental well-being and interpersonal relationships (see

Haltom, Ratcliff 2020: 1f; Sahoo et al. 2023: 1013; Hunter 2017). The disclosure of one's sexual orientation and gender identity— whether subtly or overtly – often brings emotional reactions, ranging from vulnerability to validation. The majority of participants in this study described their coming out experiences as moments of relief and empowerment, allowing them to feel more authentic and liberated. Yet coming out is rarely a one-time event; rather, it unfolds as an ongoing negotiation of self across different social contexts (see Sahoo et al. 2023: 1013). In the following, a range of (initial) coming out narratives is presented that offer insights into the diverse experiences of the study's participants.

Anil, who is one participant who lives very open, had his first coming out in 7th grade with the age of 12, when he confided to someone, he was close with – his mother's best friend's daughter, Smriti:

“I said, (...) Smriti, I think I might be gay, or I like men. And she told me it's absolutely normal, you know? Like there is nothing wrong with me. So, I think that idea was imprinted on my brain from very little” (Anil 2024: Transcript 1).

Smriti's immediate affirmation had a lasting impact on Anil's self-acceptance. This early moment of validation contributed to the internalisation of a sense of normality regarding his sexual orientation. Rather than reacting with shock or judgement, Smriti's calm response provided Anil with a foundation of reassurance, allowing him to feel seen and understood in a heteronormative society.

Years later, after completing high school, Anil moved to New York to study social work. There, he experienced a different form of coming out – not through a singular declaration, but the authentic and open expression of his sexuality. He reflected:

“[I]n New York. (...) that's where I came out, let's say, if that's the right term. Not that I announced to people that I'm gay, but I was very honest. And, you know, lived my life openly. And I think it was never a big deal, if that makes sense” (Anil 2024: Transcript 1).

In contrast to Nepal, the U.S. context, particularly within his progressive academic environment of social workers, allowed him to feel a sense of freedom, authenticity, and liberation, enabling him to live openly with reduced fear. This was facilitated by the presence of legal protections and a more visible queer culture, which gave him a sense of safety and legitimacy. In Nepal, however, the absence of discourse surrounding queer-related issues around that time made disclosure considerably more difficult. Anil reflected: “[W]hen something is not talked about openly, you don't feel comfortable revealing certain things about yourself” (ibid.). Drawing a comparison to how structural inequalities like racism only begin to shift once they are addressed publicly, he emphasised the importance of queer visibility (see ibid.). Anil's experience

demonstrates how early validation and a broader societal openness shape the conditions in which GBQ individuals can live more out and about.

Unlike Anil, Krishna chooses to live more discreetly and navigates his environment very carefully to avoid possible rejection. His decision to come out to a trusted university friend marked a rare moment of openness. She responded with kindness and understanding, affirming his trust in her. Yet her reaction also reflected the risks embedded in Krishna's environment: She expressed concerns for his safety, warning him to not tell others. Studying in a conservative, religious setting, Krishna was acutely aware that visibility could provoke hostility (see Krishna 2024: Transcript 1). Her caution reinforced the need for secrecy and emphasised the tension between trust and fear that shapes many coming out experiences in restrictive contexts. Besides having disclosed his sexuality to his college friend, he also lives openly within a close-knit queer friend group, where he feels supported and validated as their surrounding allows him to authentically express himself (see *ibid.*).

While Krishna is cautious in his management of his gay identity in almost all spheres of his life, Dharendra displays a markedly different approach, living openly among friends and colleagues. I first met him surrounded by a visibly queer friend group at a PoMSOGIESC+ networking event called *Queering the Bond* (see Observation Protocol 2024: *Queering the Bond*), showing that he belongs to queer social circles. For Dharendra, being out in certain areas of his life is a personal choice and a professional stance. As a program coordinator for a well-known museum in Kathmandu Valley, he works on PoMSOGIESC+ issues and designs events for the community, for which he considers his openness regarding his sexual identity as essential. He shared that he disclosed his identity already during his job interview, emphasising that his queerness is inseparable from the work he does: "I have to be honest about it" (Dharendra 2024: Transcript 2). Across different workplaces, he has maintained this openness about his sexual identity, reflecting both commitment to authenticity and a desire to create a more inclusive environment (see *ibid.*).

Beyond coming out to friends and colleagues, several participants described their initial coming out experiences shaped by romantic or emotional intimacy and/or attraction. Whether confiding to someone they had been in a relationship with or to a person they felt attracted to, these moments often carried heightened emotional stakes. The following narratives illustrate how vulnerability, trust and desire intersect in the context of early coming out experiences.

Ajit, for instance, chose to disclose his sexuality to a junior during his undergraduate studies to whom he felt attracted to. His coming out experience in college was shaped by a desire for emotional validation in an environment where he often felt marginalised and objectified. In

navigating a setting marked by heterosexist, homophobic attitudes and bullying, Ajit sought to establish a more genuine and emotionally secure connection. He decided to come out to a fellow student he admired both intellectually and physically – someone he felt comfortable with. Saroj, as Ajit called him, responded with acceptance, assuring Ajit that it did not matter to him and that he was proud of his openness and appreciated his honesty. When Ajit further admitted his romantic feelings, Saroj reacted with kindness, saying he felt lucky to be admired and adding: “Only if I was born gay, I would have definitely dated you as well or if you were a girl, I would have dated you too” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3). Saroj’s reaction, which was both supportive and encouraging, stood in stark contrast to Ajit’s broader college experience, where he had faced discrimination and sexual harassment. Ajit’s decision to come out to Saroj provided him the validation he had been seeking – in an environment where he was often othered by his fellow students (see *ibid.*). This experience allowed him to feel seen and respected not only for his sexual identity, but also for the courage it required to disclose it.

Another example of an intimate initial coming out experience is that of Binod, who first revealed his sexuality to an ex-girlfriend during a long conversation in COVID-19 lockdown. Although hesitant and nervous, Binod was met with unexpected empathy and reassurance. His former partner responded with care and support, and their bond remained intact even after the disclosure. In addition to her, Binod chose to come out to a small circle of trusted friends (see Binod 2024: Transcript 1). These cautious yet affirming moments illustrate how disclosures within close relationships can foster lasting trust and emotional relief.

Shreya’s coming out process was shaped by a growing sense of comfort with her identity and a strong desire to live more authentically among those closest to her. Much like Binod, the first person she disclosed to was her then-boyfriend in 11th grade. Their relationship had been easy-going, which gave her the confidence to come out. She shared:

“The first person that I told about my sexuality was my boyfriend back then. And then I used to make fun of it a lot. I used to tease him. I used to say: “Oh my god, I like your sister more than you.” But the thing is, he was not jealous of it. He accepted me, so it was not that bad” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 3).

Rather than reacting with jealousy or confusion, he responded with acceptance, which reassured her. As her confidence grew, Shreya began disclosing her sexual orientation to a select group of friends in Kathmandu, where she moved to for her undergraduate studies. The choice of whom to tell was intentional, she only opened up to people she trusted deeply and who were very open-minded. This careful selectivity, she reflected, likely contributed to her only receiving positive reactions (see *ibid.*). Beyond seeking acceptance, Shreya also sought to gauge how

people would respond to her authenticity. Each supportive reaction helped her feel closer to the people around her and more grounded in who she was.

For queer individuals, coming out is a deeply personal and transformative process that has a significant impact on self-perception, mental health, and interpersonal relationships. Although experiences vary widely, many participants in this study described their disclosures as moments of relief, empowerment, and emotional connection. From Anil's early validation by a trusted peer to Krishna's cautious navigation of a conservative environment, and from Dhirendra's professional openness to intimate revelations, these narratives illustrate diverse ways GBQ individuals in Nepal manage their visibility. Participants often came out selectively, choosing people they trusted and surroundings that felt safe. This strategic disclosure helped minimise harm while fostering deeper emotional bonds and greater self-acceptance. However, there were also narratives from participants who had sobering, even very bad experiences with their coming out. These will be discussed in a later sub-chapter.

Nevertheless, these varied coming out stories highlight how affirmation, safety, and social context play crucial roles in shaping the lived realities of GBQ individuals, making visibility both a deeply empowering and complex act.

Coming Out to (Extended) Family: Sisters, Brothers, and Cousins

Although most existing research on coming out focuses on parents, the limited studies that include non-parental family members suggest that siblings often play a significant, supportive role in the lives of LGBTQIA+ youth. For instance, Kristin Beals and Letitia Peplau (2008) found that 63% of gay men and lesbians in the U.S. had come out to their siblings, with 60% of those reported receiving support and acceptance (see *ibid.*). Complementary qualitative studies in the U.S.²⁴ further show that disclosure often strengthens emotional closeness between siblings (see Hilton, Szymanski 2011; Jenkins 2008). Taken together, these findings highlight the role of siblings in fostering continued familial connection and emotional support after disclosure (see Gafsky et al. 2018: 4).

This dynamic is replicated in the present study, wherein seven out of ten participants described disclosing their sexual orientation first – or among their initial disclosures – to siblings or cousins, thereby also underscoring the central role of family in the Nepali context. Contrary to findings of previous studies in China and the U.S., which suggested that LGBTQIA+ individuals tend to disclose their sexual orientation primarily to friends and less often to family members (e.g. Chow, Cheng 2010; D'Augelli, Hershberger 1993; Rossi 2010; Wong, Tang

²⁴ Similar comparative studies in the Asian context could not be identified, which is why reference is made to case studies from the United States.

2004), the present study found that most participants trusted (extended) family members early in their coming out journeys.

Ajit's coming out to his siblings illustrates how emotional, complex, and relational these moments can be – especially within close-knit families. His sister, with whom he shares a deep bond, was the first to suspect and subsequently gently confronted him after observing his close relationship with his then-partner. Ajit shared:

“It was 2017. (...) My boyfriend then, now my ex-boyfriend came to Nepalgunj. (...) It didn't take long for my sister to get along with my boyfriend. (...) she was not aware of my sexuality. One day, when we were making (...) snacks (...) she asked, why does she find our bonding very eccentric? About me and my boyfriend's bonding. It made me aghast. It had my guard off. What was she going to ask? I got astonished, the way she asked. Upon that, I asked: “What difference do you see with him apart from other friends that I have?” She said: “How can someone who has just been known for a month travel to see you from Kathmandu taking this long road?” And he said, he's just a friend (laughs). And she said: “Are you guys dating?” And I felt so emotional. I couldn't say anything. (...) I cried. I cried back then. If I have to rephrase what I said. Then, I've always been a different guy. I've never been a regular guy. I think I love him. I told her everything, showing him. He also said: “We love each other.” And she cried” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

This moment turned into an emotional exchange in which Ajit confirmed his sexual identity, leading both siblings to tears. Although she initially struggled with the sudden shift in their dynamic, fearing she might be losing her brother, because he was in a relationship, as Ajit recalled, she ultimately responded with love and care. Later, she confided in their brother, who responded with calm acceptance, assuring Ajit that his safety and well-being mattered most, despite his personal religious beliefs:

“I asked him, how he felt about it and he said: “I do not care as long as you are safe, as long as you are studying well.” And I cried. But he said: “The Bible says different things.” And I do not know how come I asked that question, but I said: “Does bible tell you to be inhuman to others?” And he said: “No, but it is restricted. It's not good, but you should not care about that since you are not Christian.” That is what he said” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

This exchange shows that sibling love can transcend all else, as demonstrated by the acceptance and support Ajit received from his brother, despite the fact that his brother's Christian beliefs oppose homosexuality and would have predicted a different response. Ajit described his relationship with his siblings as well as his brother- and sister-in-law as characterised by support and acceptance. They even went so far to imagine a future where he might be marrying a man.

His experience highlights the emotional depth, importance of familial support and evolving nature of sibling relationships in the context of queer disclosure.

Ajit's coming out experiences aligns closely with the findings of Erika Grafsky et al. (2018), who argued that genuine sibling support and emotional closeness can ease the psychological burden of disclosing one's sexual identity. Their research about "Youth Disclosure of Sexual Orientation to Siblings and Extended Family" (2018) underscores the idea that when siblings share a strong emotional bond, the coming out process can be significantly less distressing (see *ibid.*: 8). Ajit's experience reflects this: The support he received from his sister and brother, as well as his brother- and sister-in-law not only helped him navigate the complex process of disclosing his identity but also affirmed his place within the family. The emotional intimacy shared between Ajit and his siblings transformed what could have been a moment of rupture into one of connection, reinforcing the transformative power of familial bonds in queer identity development.

In contrast to Ajit's direct and emotional moments of disclosure to his siblings, Binod's experience reflects a more subtle dynamic of assumed understanding. Although Binod never explicitly disclosed his sexual orientation to his brother, he recalled a conversation that suggested tacit awareness. Upon Binod's departure for studying in the United States, his brother remarked: "I always know that you are kind of different. So, love whoever you feel like you love" (Binod 2024: Transcript 1). For Binod, this ambiguous yet affirming statement indicated an unspoken acceptance. Just as Ajit's sister had sensed his sexual orientation prior to his coming out, Binod's brother also seemed to suspect his queerness, expressing quiet support without requiring direct confirmation. Unlike Ajit, however, he has never directly addressed his queerness with his brother, suggesting a quieter form of support based on innuendo rather than open dialogue.

As with Ajit and Binod, Shreya too received recognition from a sibling who seemed to be already aware of her identity before she explicitly came out. Her sister, who is bisexual as well, responded positively, saying that she had always known of Shreya's sexual orientation. Her understanding and their shared sexual preferences appear to have deepened their relationship, with Shreya expressing happiness that her younger sister is already living her sexuality openly in certain spaces – something Shreya herself struggled with at that same age (see Shreya 2024: Transcript 2). These shared experiences and this mutual understanding created a sense of solidarity, emotional support and reassurance within an otherwise heteronormative societal and familial environment.

While Ajit, Binod and Shreya had their coming out to their siblings during adolescence or early adulthood, Sabin's decision to come out to his brothers and cousins occurred later in life, shaped by a pivotal life transition. After spending several years in the UK, achieving his master's degree and working, Sabin made the conscious choice to return to Nepal as his full, authentic self. Reflecting on this turning point he shared: "[W]hen I decided to come back from United Kingdom to Nepal, I did not want to live the same life that I was living back then when I was younger" (Sabin 2024: Transcript 3). During his youth in Nepal, Sabin often felt compelled to act more masculine and conceal his true identity (see chapter 4.3.3 '*Coming In*': *Acceptance, Embrace, Empowerment*). Determined not to repeat that pattern, he chose to disclose his sexuality to several (extended) family members – to his younger and older brother and ten cousins – a few months before returning. His younger brother responded with empathy and respect. Sabin recalled:

"The younger one is on his own world, but he was also very respectful about me when I was coming out to him. He said: (...) I wish, I knew it without you telling me. So, I feel sorry for that, but he respects the fact" (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2).

Coming out to his older brother was more emotionally charged. Sabin admitted feelings of anxiousness:

"I was also very, very scared when I came out to my elder brother. I was very scared if, before he answered to my text, I felt, what if he does not accept me? Or what if the life would be harder when I am back in Kathmandu?" (Sabin 2024: Transcript 3).

To his relief, his fears were mostly unfounded as his older brother responded with warmth and support (see *ibid.*: Transcript 2, 3). Nevertheless, Sabin noted that full acceptance still seemed to be complex. He shared that at times his brother makes comments, especially in response to Sabin's more expressive self-representation:

"[S]ometimes when I'm a little bit louder with my fashion, or with my outfits, he would be like: "Oh, why are you still doing this?" And I would be like: "That is what I am." But yeah, sometimes he says things. But deep down, he supports me completely" (Sabin 2024: Transcript 3).

As mentioned, Sabin chose to come out not only to his brothers but also to several cousins, with the intention of building a support system in case of potential familial conflict due to his homosexuality. His aim was to inform as many trusted family members as possible before returning to Nepal. Despite his initial fears, he was met with acceptance: All but one of his cousins responded supportively. This affirmation from within his extended family ultimately strengthened Sabin's confidence and enabled him to live more openly upon his return. Sabin's

narrative emphasises the importance of familial recognition by showing how strong familial bonds and pre-existing trust can provide a foundation for acceptance. His conscious effort to come out to his siblings and cousins before returning to Nepal highlights the importance of supportive family relationships in navigating queer visibility, especially within a society where GBQ individuals are frequently met with resistance.

In addition to siblings, several participants chose to first confide in cousins, making them a strategic choice for initial disclosures. For instance, Krishna described a moment of intense vulnerability during a health crisis that compelled him to come out to a cousin, expressing his desire for at least one family member to know about his sexual identity. His cousin responded supportively and has remained accepting ever since (see Krishna 2024: Transcript 1). Similarly, Bikram shared his preferences with cousins early on (see Bikram 2024: Transcript 1), while Dhirendra first disclosed to a cousin before later to his sisters (see Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 2, 3.1). All these aforementioned narratives collectively highlight how familial relationships – especially those marked by trust and emotional intimacy – can foster supportive environments for GBQ individuals as they negotiate disclosure of their sexual identities. In collectivistic societies like Nepal, where family life is tightly interwoven and the maintenance of familial harmony is highly valued, disclosing one's GBQ identity to non-parental members frequently serves strategic entry point into the process of revealing one's identity to the family in a more emotionally secure way. Siblings and cousins serve as emotional bridges within the same family unit, providing reassurance and acceptance in contexts where direct communication with parents may feel too risky. This further underscores the central role of non-parental kin in the coming out processes of GBQ individuals in Nepal.

Disclosure to Parents as Particularly Sensitive Terrain

Disclosing one's sexual orientation to parents is widely recognised as one of the most challenging developmental milestones for LGBTQIA+ individuals (see Savin-Williams 2001; Willoughby et al. 2008). Many anticipate negative consequences, ranging from disappointment to rejection. Consequently, individuals may either adopt a strategy of complete avoidance regarding their coming out or, may choose to go into conversation with fear and anxiety (Heatherington, Lavner 2008; Perrin-Wallqvist, Lindblom 2015; Savin-Williams 2001). This is not surprising, given the central role parents play in shaping emotional and social development. As posited by development theories (e.g. Ainsworth 1989; Mead 1934; Rohner 2004), the perceived acceptance or rejection from primary caregivers, such as parents, exerts a deep impact on an individual's self-worth and psychological well-being (see Willoughby et al. 2008: 72). Although the participants in this study are no longer adolescents, these dynamics remain

relevant: Only two out of nine are out to their parents, while one participant is orphaned, therefore unable to disclose to his parents.

Nevertheless, parental reactions to coming out vary widely, ranging from withdrawal of support to full acceptance (see Heatherington, Lavner 2008: 329, 331f), thus rendering the disclosure a potential site of rupture or, conversely, of healing, which is also evident in this study's findings. Brian Willoughby et al. (2006) described disclosure as a 'stressor', one that often challenges deeply held family values, expectations, and boundaries (see *ibid.*). In South Asia, traditional family structures and values remain deeply influential. Expectations surrounding gender roles, heterosexual marriage, and social propriety continue to define acceptable life paths. Within this heteronormative framework, PoMSOGIESC+ individuals in Nepal face complex challenges around visibility and authenticity within their families (see chapter 1.3 and 2.2). The lasting weight of family expectations is clearly reflected in this study as most of the participants still hide their sexuality from their parents. This underscores that – even in adulthood – coming out to one's parents remains particularly sensitive and emotionally charged.

Building on the emotional weight and complexity of coming out to parents, this tension was similarly reflected in a discussion on *Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes* held in Kathmandu during Pride Month. This discussion, which was attended by PoMSOGIESC+ youth and young adults, focused on issues in Nepali society. All participants in this discussion were members of the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Kathmandu Valley. Several individuals articulated that they had refrained from coming out to their parents, not due to personal uncertainty regarding their identity, but rather in recognition of the normative expectations imposed upon them by their families. These expectations – often centred on heterosexual marriage and reproduction – represented an idealised vision of adulthood that many queer individuals felt unable or unwilling to fulfil. Many participants expressed concerns that deviating from this normative trajectory could provoke parental reactions ranging from shock, denial, and dismissal to minimisation, such as framing their queer identity as a temporary phase. The attendees attributed these reactions to the deeply ingrained heteronormative and patriarchal values with which their parents were raised, and which continue to shape their intergenerational relationships, expectations and worldviews (see Observation Protocol 2024: Discussion on "Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes"). These insights mirror the fears and realities expressed by the participants in this study.

One of the participants of this discussion, whose words left a lasting impression, was Shreya – who later also became a participant in this study. Her contribution to the event offered a deeply personal insight into the emotional weight of navigating queer identity within the bounds of

rigid familial expectations. Shreya explained that she had not yet come out to her parents, fearing severe emotional consequences. In her words: “I am my mother’s daughter, but if I come out as bisexual, I become the devil in her eyes and fail to meet her expectations. I am afraid of my mother” (Observation Protocol 2024: Discussion on “Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes”). Her fear of being perceived ‘evil’ by her mother reflects the powerful influence of internalised heteronormativity and the significance of parental approval in shaping self-expression. Although Shreya has come out to a trusted circle of friends and to her sister – who is also bisexual – she continues to conceal both her sexual orientation and her current partner from her parents. Her narratives illustrate the tension between authenticity and meeting familial expectations, especially in the context where her mother’s fixation on heterosexual marriage and social conformity leaves little room for deviation. She explained:

“[M]y mother is obsessed with the concept of marriage. Even before I planned to be in Kathmandu one of the reasons that played a significant role in me shifting to Kathmandu was that I was supposed to get married to a guy who was seven years older than me” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 2).

Moving to the capital thus became both a form of physical distance and symbolic resistance. She continued:

“And the reason why I moved to Kathmandu was also because I knew how conservative my parents were and I did not want to live there. And I did not want to restrict myself with so many possibilities that I could have explored. I think being queer and my queer identity was also one of the things I explored after I came to Kathmandu” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 2).

As soon as she shifted to Kathmandu, Shreya felt more liberated in exploring her sexuality. In Kathmandu, she was also able to come out to selected individuals due to trust and emotional safety, something that was lacking in her parental house in Pokhara. Her cautious approach to disclosure reflects the ongoing emotional work involved in protecting her needs and being considering towards a family context she describes as unforgiving: “I think my parents will have a heart attack” (Shreya 2024: Transcript 1). Shreya’s story illustrates how the psychological and emotional burden of parental non-disclosure continues to shape her everyday life and doesn’t allow her to be her full authentic self. Through Shreya’s case, the intersection of fear, resilience and strategic disclosure becomes vividly clear.

Similar to Shreya, Ajit has also not come out to his parents. While he is open with selected friends and extended family members, he deliberately refrains from disclosing his sexual identity to his parents due to fear of disappointing them – particularly in relation to his mother’s normative expectations around gender expression and heterosexual marriage. Ajit’s narrative

reflects how internalised familial ideals and assumed parental disappointment continue to shape decisions around disclosure within heteronormative family structures. Ajit's hesitation to come out is rooted in his perception of his mother's emotional expectations and her adherence to traditional gender norms. While his siblings are aware and supportive of his sexuality, he fears that coming out to his parents – especially his mother – would be met with heartbreak and rejection (see Ajit 2024: Transcript 3). Ajit described his mother's comments about his feminine expression, such as wearing hairpins or nail polish, would already signal her discomfort with nonconformity. Even though he sometimes deflects with excuses or asserts his preference, these comments seem to be a reason why he refrains from coming out to his mother. He worries that living truthfully and authentically might shatter the hopes his parents, especially his mother, have projected onto him. He explained:

“I feel terrible because I may think – I know I have to hurt her just by being myself, but since she does not understand everything, that I know (...) will hurt me, looking at her expectations getting shattered. I think she has done a lot for me and my siblings, and my father has also done a lot. Maybe that will make me sad, like devastated even. If I have to come across such scenario, I'll have to be so strong.”

(Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

Ajit for now, chose silence over disclosure, not out of denial, but as a way to protect himself and his parents from disappointment and emotional harm. He foresees future scenarios, such as societal pressure to marry, in which coming out might become unavoidable. For now, he retains, stating: “I don't dare to come out to my parents any soon” (ibid.). While his father appears more indifferent, his mother's longing to “comply by the normality of the society” (ibid.) stands as a significant barrier. Even subtle moments, such as her casual remark during a video on PoMSOGIESC+ issues – “it's fine (...) as long as your kid is not gay” (ibid.), have left a lasting impression, reinforcing his decision to remain silent.

Ajit's decision not yet to come out to his parents resonates with Horton's (2018) conceptualisation of silence as a deliberate and complex form of negotiation within the family. Horton argues that for many LGBTQIA+ individuals, choosing not to name or disclose their sexuality is not simply avoidance but a way of living in contradictory spaces – where family ties and dissident sexualities co-exist in tension (see ibid.: 1071). Rather than viewing family and queerness as antagonistic, some individuals, like Ajit, navigate the “interstices between normative and queer life worlds” (ibid.) by utilising silence as a strategic mode of kinship formation (see ibid.). In this sense, Ajit's silence becomes a means of maintaining familial harmony while preserving a fragile sense of self within a heteronormative structure that offers little space for open queerness.

In contrast to Ajit, who presently choose silence to protect familial harmony, Dhirendra takes a more hopeful, future-oriented stance towards coming out to his parents. While he, too, has not yet disclosed his sexual orientation to them, he expressed a clear desire to do so eventually. For Dhirendra this step holds deep personal significance: Not only because he believes his parents deserve to know who he is, but also because he envisions a future in which he can introduce his partner to them and be met with understanding, respect, and acceptance (see Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 3.2). Although he acknowledged the emotional weight of such a disclosure, Dhirendra emphasised the need to first achieve financial and emotional independence, ensuring that – should his parents respond with rejection – he would still be able to support and sustain himself independently (see *ibid.*). He recalled: “I feel like it's important for me to come out to them because I'm their child and I feel like they deserve to know who I am and what I like, who I like” (*ibid.*). His narrative underscores both the internal preparation and the enduring hope that acceptance within family is possible, even if it takes time.

Unlike Dhirendra, who views coming out to his parents as a necessary future, Binod adopts a more cautious and gradual approach. Although he has not yet explicitly disclosed his sexual orientation to his parents, he believes they would not respond negatively – especially his mother, who has expressed deep affection and unconditional support for him in the past (see Binod 2024: Transcript 1). Instead of direct conversation, Binod slowly discloses himself with subtle hints. At one point, he asked his mother: “[I]f I change myself, would you still gonna love me?” (*ibid.*) to which she replied affirmatively, reinforcing his sense of emotional safety. Nevertheless, he refrains from full disclosure from the time being – not due to fear of rejection, but to protect his parents from potential social judgement. As he explained, he wants to ensure that when others make remarks about him, his parents won't feel embarrassed or unprepared (see *ibid.*). His approach reflects a protective form of care and strategic approach that aims to promote understanding while minimising the emotional burden on his family.

Following Binod's account, a similar attitude emerged during my field observation at *Queering the Bond*, wherein I was partnered with a male-presenting individual who self-identified as bisexual. Despite not having formally come out to his parents, they felt no urgent necessity to do so, attributing this to the unconditional love and acceptance they already receive from their parents (see Observation Protocol 2024: *Queering the Bond*). This narrative highlights how, for some individuals, explicit disclosure may feel less necessary when familial bonds are strong and acceptance is already present.

As previously mentioned, only two out of nine participants had fully disclosed their sexuality to their parents. Aahan was one of them. He first came out to his mother over the phone at the

age of seventeen, a moment he described as very important yet emotionally ambivalent. His father had passed away by then, and following this initial disclosure, Aahan proceeded to gradually inform his sister and other extended family members. Today, he considers himself as fully out to his family, stating that “everyone knows” (Aahan 2024: Transcript 1). Aahan articulated his mother’s initial reaction by visible discomfort and emotional withdrawal. He interpreted her response as one of disgust, although she did not verbally reject or condemn him. He noted that the conversation offered little emotional resolution or clarity:

“[B]ack then it was like, mom, I’m gay. And it’s like, okay. Like the conversation itself was (...) not fulfilling or like I didn’t take away anything from out of it. (...) she was obviously disgusted. But she didn’t say anything (...) too bad that I now think that she would deny me. So, she was not shocked as well because I have been pretty gay all my life. So, I would say (...) I’m one of the lucky ones that my mother doesn’t hate me for it” (Aahan 2024: Transcript 1).

Even though, the exchange left him feeling somehow disconnected and unacknowledged, he interpreted it as such as her muted response may have stemmed from longstanding awareness of his sexuality. Over time, Aahan observed a gradual shift in his mother’s attitude as he sensed a growing acceptance from her side. He reflected that she regards him now as more confident. However, he remains aware that full acceptance is a process that takes time, therefore he has chosen to give her the space she needs, as he stated: “[S]he will take some time to accept it. And I’m honestly ready to give her some time” (ibid.). Aahan’s reflections regarding his coming out to his mother reveal his broader attitudes towards queer disclosure. He asserted that coming out is not about public declarations or announcements; rather, it is a relational act, oriented toward people that matter the most. He explained: “Basically, you don’t need to make an announcement, but the people around you who matter, your friends, close friends, your family, the ones who need to know should know” (ibid.). Aahan’s coming out experiences with his mother illustrate the significance he placed on transparency with those closest to him, such as his family. The decision to disclose his sexuality to his mother stemmed from the importance of family in general, their relationship and his desire for her to know and understand this aspect of his identity. Despite her initial reaction being characterised as emotionally unresponsive – neither overtly positive nor explicitly negative – Aahan interpreted her apparent indifference as a form of emotional self-protection rather than outright rejection. Over time, he began to notice subtle but meaningful shifts in her behaviour and perspectives towards him. She gradually acknowledged his growing confidence and autonomy which signalled a process of tentative acceptance. Furthermore, Aahan shared that both his mother and his sister were intending to relocate to Kathmandu to live with him (see ibid.). This can be interpreted as an indication of

deepening familial closeness and an ongoing journey toward acceptance. In this way, Aahan's coming out narrative emphasises the strategic yet deeply personal nature of disclosure within a family context characterised by emotional ambivalence.

As with Aahan, Anil chose to disclose his sexual identity to his parents. However, in contrast to Aahan's more ambivalent experience, Anil's coming out can be considered a best-case scenario. Compared to all other participants in this study a rather uncommon yet noteworthy example of immediate familial acceptance that was not only supportive but also emotionally healing. Anil's experiences are in accordance with previous findings, which stated that individuals who have concealed their same-sex attraction often experience a sense of relief, self-acceptance, pride, and liberation – particularly when their coming out is met with parental support and understanding (see Achar, Gopal 2023; Perrin-Wallqvist, Lindblom 2015; Guittar 2013). Anil's experiences reflect this dynamic: His disclosure to his parents was met with care and affirmation and resulted in a deepened emotional connection within the family.

Anil came out to his parents in June 2014, a moment he had been anticipating for some time. Despite having come out to others previously, this particular disclosure carried significantly emotional weight as previous coming outs to other people, underscoring the importance of family in his life. Anil chose a quiet evening at home during a family dinner, to initiate the conversation. After some hesitation and repeated articulation of concerns regarding their potential reaction, his father took over the word, saying: "Okay, are you trying to tell us you're gay? Are you seeing someone?" (Anil 2024: Transcript 1). This unexpected moment of parental initiative led to the revelation that both parents had long suspected or rather known about Anil's sexual orientation. He shared:

"They already knew. And that's it. So, it was very easy for me, you know, that they knew. And what he said was: "Well, you know, we had been waiting for you to tell us, because we did not think it was our space to come and ask you, because it's such a personal thing." (...) They said that they always knew, because I think they're parents, you know, they figured things out, right? Like, let's say, not having a girlfriend, not having a desire to meet girls. And some stereotypes, obviously kicking, you know? Likes to dance, likes to do creative things, is very isolated" (Anil 2024: Transcript 1).

Anil described this moment as very emotional, very intense. What followed the other day was another profoundly emotional, affirming experience. Anil received a joint email from his parents while he was at work – a message that he still finds difficult to speak about without tears at the time of our interview. In the email, his parents expressed love, support, and a deep sense of closeness that had emerged from his disclosure. They wrote as Anil recalled: "[T]hank

you for disclosing, you know, your whatever to us. It has brought us immensely closer. Please know that it's not your fault. It's natural. And we are the reason behind it" (ibid.). For Anil, this affirmation represented more than just tolerance, it marked an emotional milestone of shared understanding and intimacy.

While it seemed as if his father accepted the news instantly, his mother needed more time to process the information. Anil explained:

"[I]t again still took some time to come back to that normalcy because it's such a heavy topic. And actually, it took my mom much longer. Not that she had any problem with me being gay. But I think it took her a little bit longer to process and come to terms and accept and recognize that it's okay, you know. For my dad, it was instant. But for my mom, it took a long time" (Anil 2024: Transcript 1).

Anil's mother's gradual acceptance mirrors the ongoing process experienced by Aahan's mother and illustrates that acceptance is often a negotiated and evolving journey rather than a single, absolute moment.

Anil's story does not end with parental support alone. His extended family also accepts him, including his marriage to a same-sex partner. He shared:

"I have a very open-minded family, not just my parents. None of my relatives have had problems with me being married. They've accepted me with open arms since the day, they know my story" (Anil 2024: Transcript 1).

In a social context where many GBQ individuals face familial estrangement and/or conditional acceptance, Anil's narrative stands out as an example of familial tolerance, love, and inclusion. In contrast to his earlier hesitations to come out, Anil's later experience demonstrates how openness within the family can reshape emotional relationships and reaffirm a sense of belonging. His narrative thus confirms the transformative potential of familial acceptance, not only for individual self-acceptance, but also for deepening familial bonds.

The narratives presented illustrate the deeply emotional and varied ways of (not) coming out to parents for GBQ individuals in Nepal. While some participants, including Aahan and Anil, received acceptance and/or supportive responses, others, such as Shreya, Ajit and Dharendra, handle disclosure cautiously, shaped by fear, silence and/or the hope for future acceptance. For all the different experiences, however, a common theme persists: The profound emotional impact and familial significance of coming out, even in adulthood. These findings emphasise that the act of disclosure, whether chosen, delayed, or withheld, remains a deeply strategic and affectively charged arrangement within and in consideration of heteronormative structures.

‘Coming With’ as an Alternative to Coming Out

Some coming out experiences shared by the study’s participants diverge from Euro-centric coming out processes. A culturally specific mode of disclosure has emerged that challenges the dominant, universalised notion of coming out. In order to capture this variation, I adopt the term ‘coming with’, as introduced by Huang and Brouwer (2018). This concept underscores the integration of queer identity within familial and societal frameworks, rather than positioning them as contrary. ‘Coming with’ describes how LGBTQIA+ individuals remain embedded in traditional, heteronormative family structures while gradually disclosing their identity through indirect strategies. These may include introducing a same-sex partner as a close friend, integrating queer peers into family life, initiating conversation about LGBTQIA+ topics, or gently challenging heteronormative assumptions held by family members, e.g. through clothing and hobbies (see *ibid.*: 107-110).

I find ‘coming with’ suitable for describing the experiences of my participants as it encompasses a broader range of techniques and reflects the process of disclosure as ongoing and negotiable. Rather than a singular, declarative act, ‘coming with’ unfolds as a gradual process of sensitisation, education, and subtle negotiation with the aim to foster acceptance and to minimise the potential rupture often accompanied by coming out.

Sabin for instance gives hints to his parents on a daily basis. He exemplifies the practice of ‘coming with’ through indirect, symbolic, and performative strategies. Rather than disclosing his gay identity directly, he sensitises his parents and extended family through visual hints such as outer appearance and public visibility. Sabin’s process of ‘coming with’ is rooted in daily acts of self-expression. Through his fashion choices – bright colours, flowy garments, jewellery, heels and other gender-nonconforming clothing – he shows facets of his gay identity in subtle yet persistent ways (see Sabin 2024: Transcript 1). His interest and practice in classical Nepali dance further fuel this expression, allowing him to embody his feminine and artistic side within culturally acceptable and recognisable forms. These visual strategies are not merely self-expression but also intentional signals to his parents. Sabin shared:

“[A]fter I came back from Europe, things changed, gradually I started expressing through the things I wear, through objects, through my own choices. I was always giving them hints: “Look at me! Please understand by yourself, please!”” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2).

Initially, his father responded with criticism – “Is that lady’s shoes?” (*ibid.*: Transcript 1) – but gradually reinterpreted and tolerated Sabin’s style as part of him being an artist. This slow process of normalisation, in which formerly deviant, differently intended signs are interpreted

and reframed as socially acceptable, reflects the delicate reorganisation that ‘coming with’ brings along. Sabin’s mother also interprets his gender-nonconforming appearance through a lens of ethnical belonging and humour, saying: “Oh, you are trying to be a girl from this ethnic group?” (ibid.). In such moments, the kind of acceptance Sabin seeks for has not yet been achieved, but gradually unfolds through acts of recognition, reinterpretation, and symbolic adaption.

Beyond the domestic space, Sabin extends his strategy of indirect disclosure through his presence in media. In the podcast show on queer issues in Nepal he participated in, he deliberately leaves a trace for his parents and relatives to “stumble upon” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 3). He hopes for exposure rather than avoiding it. He explained:

“I want them to watch it, or at least I want their friends to watch it. And then their friends would tell them and then they would look at it and they try to understand. Yeah, that was one of my intentions, has always been. I want my other elder, I mean, my aunts and my uncles to watch it too. And then realize that one of their son[s] is different” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 3).

The act reframes coming out not as a confrontation but as a process of mediated recognition – a process in which others, his parents, and relatives, are invited to piece together his identity through contextual cues, conversations, and media presence.

Sabin remains optimistic and hopeful that change at home is not only possible but already happening. He believes that his parents sooner or later will come to recognise and accept him as his authentic self, noting that “change is there, positive” (Sabin 2024: Transcript 2). Sabin’s narrative illustrates how ‘coming with’ somehow blurs the line between visibility and discretion. ‘Coming with’ is an ongoing process of adaption, in which familial belonging and queerness coexist, intertwined, but not yet explicitly declared. Sabin’s gay identity is not defined by a single moment of disclosure but continuously renegotiated through style, performance, media, and everyday interactions.

Following Sabin’s subtle and symbolic strategies, Ajit’s narrative offers another example of ‘coming with’. He, too, brings queerness and familial belonging into dialogue by gradually sensitising his family to queer-related topics through everyday actions and intentional gestures. In doing so, Ajit navigates his gay identity within his family without making an explicit disclosure.

Ajit regularly works for queer organisations, and his parents are aware of his involvement. However, they do not seem to associate their son’s engagement to his sexual identity. Through Ajit’s work and social circles, they are nonetheless indirectly exposed to issues of gender and sexual diversity:

“My parents know that I work for a queer organization. The program coordinator of the program is transgender, and she is famous in Nepalgunj. Most of the people from my parents' generation know her and they know what kind of woman she is (...) but they accept her. After knowing, she was fine. She did not have any problem with me working in a queer organization” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

His involvement in an PoMSOGIESC+ organisation, combined with his parents' awareness that the group is led by a trans woman, reflects a certain level of exposure, awareness, and tentative acceptance on their part. This exposure is further reinforced by a significant gesture: Ajit once invited his ex-partner to their family home, introducing him merely as a friend. While the type of relationship remained hidden, inviting him into the family space symbolically opened a window into Ajit's emotional world (see *ibid.*). Even if his parents could not grasp the depth of their connection, this coded gesture reveals Ajit's desire for recognition, connection, and understanding.

In daily life, Ajit subtly expresses his femininity in front of his mother – wearing hairpins, nail polish, and mehendi – despite her questioning remarks:

“But I don't know, lately, my mother has been acting different regarding my feminine expression, just like wearing hairpins. (...) She keeps asking me: “Being a guy, why are you wearing hairpins?” And I say, I make excuses since I have the habit of biting nails and that's why I put the nail paints. Sometimes I just become assertive and just say: “No, I just like it”” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

Ajit responded with a mix of deflection and gentle assertion, sometimes giving practical reasons and other times but admitting the truth behind it. These moments show how he gently reveals his gender-nonconformity in front of his mother.

Ajit also took advantage of the COVID-19 lockdown period to engage his family more explicitly learning about queer-related topics. With the help of his siblings, he presented a video interview of a homosexual couple to his mother. He shared the following:

“And I have made a video during lockdown. My brother and sister were telling my mother about LGBT community, showing the video, showing one of the interviews of a homosexual couple and she was okay back then and she was like: “Okay it's fine like as long as your kid is not gay”” (Ajit 2024: Transcript 3).

Despite the neutrality of his mother's response – she did not object the couple – expressed relief that her own child was not homosexual. While this moment reveals certain ambivalences, it nonetheless points to the potential of queer visibility to shift perceptions and open space for gradual acceptance.

In Ajit's case, 'coming with' involves a careful choreography of presence, expression, and education. He does not directly announce his homosexuality, but still embodies, shares, and gradually integrates queerness into the family life.

Following Ajit's quiet but intentional gestures of 'coming with', Dharendra's narrative offers another compelling example of how heteronormative environments, such as his family, can be adapted to non-heteronormative realities. Like Ajit, Dharendra used the COVID-19 lockdown period as an opportunity to introduce his parents, especially his mother, to queer-related topics through queer films and documentaries. He reflected:

“[I]t was especially around lockdown, maybe 2021 or 2022, that I tried to show a lot of (...) queer content to my parents, especially to my mother. I showed her documentaries in Nepali about queer stories, about queer love, and about diversity, but she wouldn't be interested to watch that because she mostly likes to watch, you know, like, something fun, something that has (...) comedy in it (...). So that's why also it's not very, maybe, engaging for her to watch it. But anyway, I tried that, you know, so that I could step-by-step give her hints or make her understand or maybe help her empathize with the community” (Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 3.2).

Although his efforts were often met with disinterest or denial, he remained persistent. In everyday life he subtly disrupts gender norms through his appearance, wearing earrings or carrying makeup essentials, not to make an overt statement, but to hint his family to his queerness (see *ibid.*: Transcript 1.2). These acts reflect an ongoing, patient attempt to sensitise and educate his parents without direct confrontation about his sexual identity.

Bikram's experience further illustrates strategies of 'coming with'. Like Sabin, Ajit and Dharendra, he did not disclose his sexuality to his parents in a conventional way. Instead, he sought to gently sensitise them to the idea of same-sex relationships and alternative forms of companionship beyond the traditional heterosexual marriage and conventional family through subtle, everyday conversations (see Bikram 2024: Transcript 1). Although his parents have since passed away, making a direct coming out no longer possible, his narratives reveal an intentional effort to foster understanding from and emotional connection with his parents.

In Binod's case, 'coming with' takes on the form of active education and engagement. Instead of distancing himself from those who lack awareness and/or understanding of queer-related issues, Binod chose to stay close to his family and peers, initiating conversations about those topics. Regarding his parents, he slowly 'trains' them by asking reflective questions and introducing them to ideas around gender and sexual diversity. He shared:

“I introduce them what does being gay and bisexual mean, like, and they're like: “Is it true? Like, does it happen in Nepal as well? Is it? I thought it's just a western

thing.” Like, no, no, no, that's what I'm researching. I mean, my parents literally know my research, but they still don't know their child is queer. (...) I'm like, training my parents slowly, slowly, slowly. I asked my mom last week that: “If I change myself, like, basically, if I change myself, would you still gonna love me?” “So, like, why not? You are my star.” So, I'm telling my parents slowly, slowly” (Participant Binod 2024: Transcript 1).

Although his parents are aware of his studies and his research on queer-related topics, they remain unaware of their son's queerness. Through ongoing conversations, Binod sensitises his parents and, at the same time, gradually opens space for future acceptance.

This commitment to educate others extends beyond his family. In the U.S., Binod shares an apartment with other Nepalese students who were initially openly queerphobic and sexist. He frequently goes into conversation with them about gender and sexual diversity, discrimination, and sexism. He observes changes in their attitudes, as he described:

“I talk a lot about gender issues with them (...). I can literally see that they are changing a lot. They were homophobic. (...) They are less homophobic right now. (...) Now, they are like: “Oh Binod, we saw one person. And we think the person belongs to LGBT” – in a nicer way. Like, okay, you don't have to assume it. Just be okay. (...) I don't want, in the future, if they have a child, if the child is queer, at least because of me, it's going to impact their children. Or at least the community. So, I signed my lease again. And I am teaching them about. I sometimes, in a month, when we have a conversation, they even ask me: “What is it? What's the meaning of bisexual?” And I teach them. And it's just been a year I'm living with them. Within a year, I can feel the change. They went to watch a Hindi movie. My roommate came home, and he was telling his other friend on the phone, he found the particular Hindi film more sexist and misogynist. And I was like, okay, this person talks about this thing right now.” (Binod 2024: Transcript 1).

His flatmates now express awareness, caution, and even solidarity. They ask genuine questions about diverse sexualities and even reflect critically on sexism portrayed in movies, still he has not yet disclosed his queer identity to them. Through his narrative, it becomes apparent that for Binod, ‘coming with’ carries a broader significance – one that extends beyond his own expression of queerness. It becomes an act of advocacy, rooted in the desire to shift harmful perspectives toward understanding, acceptance, and respect. His everyday interactions are not only about navigating his identity but about contributing to a meaningful and lasting change on the attitudes of those around him. For Binod, ‘coming with’ is a deliberate attempt to influence not just his immediate peers, but also their future generation.

The narratives of Sabin, Ajit, Dharendra, Bikram and Binod demonstrate how participants in this study enact culturally specific forms of queer disclosure that differs from Euro-centric coming out paradigms. Their experiences show that disclosure must not be understood as a singular moment of confession, rather it is a mode of negotiating visibility that does not demand rupture from familial and social ties. Through everyday actions, symbolic gestures and subtle negotiations, the participants engage in a conscious process of ‘coming with’. They are using indirect and ongoing strategies of queer self-disclosure aimed at gradually queering society. The accounts given illustrate that queerness and familial belonging can coexist and evolve together, allowing for diverse forms of recognition and understanding within the framework of heteronormative structures.

Summary

The findings of this study reveal that coming out among GBQ individuals in Nepal often follows a different trajectory than that typically described in Euro-centric coming out frameworks. The study underscores a fundamental difference in the conceptualisation and disclosure of sexual identity: Within collectivist cultures, such as Nepal, the maintenance of familial and community harmony often takes precedence over individual expression. As a result, most participants engage in selective coming out, with parents often remaining unaware of their children’s sexual orientation. However, five out of ten participants described a culturally specific approach to coming out: They use ‘coming with’ strategies to sensitize their surroundings, mainly their parents, to queer-related issues and gender-nonconforming behaviour, therefore subtly embracing their queer identity while at the same time avoiding familial rupture and maintaining harmony within their families. Only three out of ten participants describe themselves as fully out, yet among them, attitudes towards living out and about vary significantly.

The participants’ experiences of coming out are shaped by a complex interplay of personal, social and economic factors. For Aahan, Bikram, Ajit and Dharendra, the process of disclosure engendered a sense of relief, liberation, validation, and reinforcement of self-acceptance. Aahan, for instance, lives fully out. He emphasises that such openness can lead to new possibilities, such as his success in queer tourism and drag performance. Sabin, though only selectively disclosed, similarly finds empowerment and joy in expressing his identity.

However, other participants emphasised the risks involved in being open. Anush’s story is marked by a series of losses, including his home, education, and stability, after publicly disclosing his homosexuality. His narrative also highlights the intersectional challenges faced

by queer people with disabilities. Krishna remains sceptical, fearing societal judgement and preferring limited disclosure, while imagining a freer life abroad.

Together, the accounts presented show that among the participants of this study coming out has different meanings and is not a one-time act but instead a continuous and context-dependent negotiation. These contrasting perspectives reveal that while living openly (partly or fully) can foster feelings of empowerment and belonging, it can also lead to significant vulnerability, especially within a societal-cultural context that remains largely heteronormative.

4.4 Discussion of Findings

In what follows, I bring together the central findings of the research by discussing the lived realities of GBQ individuals in Nepal. Through the participants' narratives, it becomes apparent how they develop and navigate their identities within complex social and familial environments. Their stories reveal the ways in which they negotiate, and at times resist, dominant heteronormative expectations, as well as the varying degrees to which they are able to express themselves authentically and be open about their sexuality in different spheres of their lives.

Navigating Social Spaces

In navigating key social environments – such as the family, educational institutions during childhood and adolescence as well as universities and workplaces – GBQ individuals in Nepal face an ongoing tension between dominant heteronormative expectations and the need for authentic self-expression. These spaces function simultaneously as sites of constraint and potential transformation, demanding constant negotiation, compromise, and resilience.

Family: For most participants, the family occupies a central and enduring role in everyday life, offering emotional grounding, material support (such as housing and daily supplies), and social legitimacy. Family is a site of belonging, care, and interdependence. However, it simultaneously functions as a space where heteronormative values are strongly enforced and reproduced. Expectations around cis-heterosexual marriage, binary gender roles – often involving a clear division of labour among gender lines – and filial responsibilities structure familial relations. These expectations are mainly reinforced by parents and extended family, mostly older generations. Siblings and cousins seemed to be more liberal and accepting.

Living with one's family well into adulthood is not only common but culturally expected, reinforcing collectivistic ideals over individual autonomy. While cohabitation ensures economic security and societal respect, it also imposes barriers on the expression of gender and sexual identity. Several participants articulated a desire to live independently – not only for their own emotional well-being and personal growth but also to ease the discomfort within their

families. However, the cultural stigma attached to independent living without having started an own family, especially within the same city, is compounded by pervasive social surveillance. The decision to remain with one's family – often to preserve familial harmony, prioritise collective well-being over personal needs, and/or due to economic advantages – deters many from seeking autonomy, even when physical distance could support identity exploration and mental wellbeing.

Within this context, expressions of gender-nonconformity or non-normative sexuality, such as behaviours and appearance, become tightly linked to notions of respectability, family honour, and communal acceptance. Participants repeatedly described these expectations as both oppressive and alienating. The normalisation of heterosexual, cisgender marriage, as the prevalent legitimate and respectable life path further marginalised those who deviate from this narrow framework. Being openly queer means stepping outside this boundary. Marriage emerged as a sensitive and often non-negotiable expectation, provoking emotional distress among the participants. While some responded by distancing themselves emotionally and/or physically from their families, others adopted strategies of silence, concealment, humour, or deflection to avoid confrontation. However, stories of gradual changes surface as Anil's experience demonstrated. Anil is in a same-sex marriage and receives broad acceptance from both his family and wider social circles. This illustrates that shifts in attitudes are rare but possible and can create new models of legitimacy and belonging for GBQ individuals in Nepal. Many participants expressed that they felt compelled to hide or suppress aspects of their identity in front of their parents and/or extended family, in order to avoid shame, rejection, or conflict. In some cases, familial as well as societal norms and values had been internalised, such as the belief that men must exhibit masculinity and fulfil traditional roles as providers. One participant acknowledged internalised homophobia despite identifying as gay, highlighting the deep-rooted impact of these dominant discourses.

In reference to all of the above, an ambivalent dynamic emerges: While participants were acutely aware of the personal costs associated with their conforming to familial expectations, they also expressed a strong emotional attachment and the need to comply to the very structures. Family appeared as an emotionally significant space and socially anchoring institution that offers care, continuity, and belonging, while simultaneously reinforcing heteronormative expectations and control. Most participants had not disclosed their sexual identity to their parents and extended family, especially older generations fearing rejection or rupture. Many participants had come out to their siblings and cousins, who were almost all supportive. Among those who had disclosed in front of their parents, reactions ranged from silence to gradual

acceptance and full support (see subchapter *Negotiating Disclosure*). This complex terrain of attachment and constraint required constant negotiation between authenticity and belonging. For many, strategies such as selective disclosure, strategic silence, and context-dependent visibility became vital means of preserving relationships and maintaining a sense of connection within the familial sphere.

Several narratives portrayed this tension as inescapable. The demand to uphold family honour by marrying, reproducing, and adhering to prescribed gender roles often led individuals to lead double lives – conforming outwardly while privately navigating their queerness. The narratives underscore a continued prioritisation of collectivist values over individual expression. Rather than openly rejecting familial and societal norms, most GBQ individuals occupy complex spaces of compromise, quiet resistance, and selective visibility within familial structures that leave little room for open expression. Processes of ‘coming with’ reflect how GBQ individuals negotiate belonging by creating space for their identities while simultaneously contributing to the subtle transforming of the very social and familial systems they inhabit, therefore queering both the society and the family (see subchapter *Negotiating Disclosure*).

Educational institutions during childhood and adolescence: Most participants reflected on their school experiences as alienating. Educational institutions generally failed to provide curricula or affirming narratives around gender and sexuality. Teachers sometimes reinforced dominant norms and harmful stereotypes, while peer environments bullied and fostered shaming, particularly toward gender-nonconforming behaviour (see the following subchapter *Heterosexism and Discrimination*). These early experiences left lasting impressions, contributing to internalised stigma, isolation, and silence during formative identity-development years.

Universities and workplaces: In contrast, university and workplace settings offered diverse possibilities for the participants’ self-awareness and -expression. For some, these spaces enabled experimentation with gender expression, whether through clothing or mannerisms, and in few cases allowed integration of queerness into professional life – such as through queer-inclusive programs or businesses. However, other participants faced heteronormative peer cultures that pressured them to conceal aspects of their identity. The act of being visible and self-authentic remained a rather calculated, context-dependent decision shaped by perceived safety and the risk of exclusion.

Heterosexism and Discrimination

Another significant layer shaping the lives of GBQ individuals in Nepal is the presence of heterosexism and discrimination, both within the family and broader society. These forms of

marginalisation manifest in subtle as well as overt ways, ranging from institutional neglect to intimate acts of policing within everyday life. One of the most common experiences reported by participants was the social policing of behaviour and appearance. From early childhood, many were subjected to comments about not acting ‘manly’ enough – whether in the way they walked, talked, and/or chose hobbies. Expressions of femininity, such as wearing jewellery, applying makeup, using nail polish and mehendi, and/or dressing in clothing coded as feminine, were often met with ridicule, admonition, reprimand, or concern. These moments of social control came not only from the wider community but also from within the family, creating a sense of internalised shame and guilt around nonconformity. During the formative phases of searching for their own identity – particularly in childhood and adolescence – some participants began to associate gender-nonconforming behaviour with deviance or weakness, adopting dominant norms despite struggling with them internally.

The marginalisation of queerness is reinforced on multiple levels. Culturally, heterosexism is embedded in institutional structures and social norms that position heterosexuality and gender-conformity as default and ideal. Cultural heterosexism becomes apparent through systemic punishment and social exclusion, like the absence of legal protections against discrimination in areas such as employment, housing, education, and healthcare. Psychologically, heterosexism manifests through stereotyping, verbal abuse, bullying, and social exclusion. Heterosexist institutions and people signal to GBQ individuals that they are somehow inferior or unnatural, contributing to internal conflicts and, in some cases, delayed self-realisation and/or identity suppression. Several participants recounted experiences of harassment and bullying, particularly in educational and public spaces, where deviation from normative gender expressions led to ridicule and physical threat. In response, many developed strategies to protect themselves, including suppressing feminine traits, adopting more masculine behaviour in public, dressing in gender-conforming ways, or even faking heterosexual relationships to avoid scrutiny. Such strategies were often described not as acts of self-denial, but as necessary tools for survival in an environment that offered little acceptance or safety.

Importantly, participants who had access to PoMSOGIESC+ networks or supportive peers, family members, etc. reported higher levels of self-acceptance and agency. These spaces, communities and relationships offered opportunities to express themselves more freely, explore their identities with less fear of judgement, and build relationships based on mutual understanding and care. In such environments, participants could stand above the discrimination they experienced elsewhere, reclaiming gender-nonconforming expression not as source of shame but as a marker of authenticity and pride.

Constructing Sexual Identity within Intersecting Contexts

Despite societal and familial constraints and instances of heterosexism and discrimination, participants described pathways of self-discovery and empowerment. Underlying and driving these trajectories is the formation of a gay, bisexual, or queer identity, shaped by the intersecting social structures, cultural norms, personal experiences, and relational environments. Familial expectations, cultural stigma, social marginalisation, access to community support, and intersecting factors such as caste and class, dis/ability and/or orphanhood further influence this process. The development of GBQ identity is complex and ongoing, unfolding not linearly but through overlapping phases.

Many participants recalled early feelings of being different from those around them, experiencing same-sex attractions often without having the language or conceptual framework to make sense of these feelings. These early experiences of same-sex desires were often accompanied by confusion and shame, largely due to the absence of inclusive education, affirming vocabulary or visible queer representation in their surroundings. Exposure to queer-related discourses and the acquisition of queer-related knowledge through schooling, peers, organisations, online platforms, and media enabled a process of self-identification, fostering recognition, validation and a sense of community.

The emergence of supportive networks – whether through friendships, online communities, or PoMSOGIESC+ groups – proved crucial in affirming participant's identities and helping them realise they were not alone. These connections offered a sense of belonging, reduced feelings of isolation and encouraged self-confidence, often culminating in greater self-acceptance and empowerment. In environments perceived as safe and affirming, individuals increasingly embraced visibility and exercised agency in expressing their identities.

Intimacy, both emotional and physical, was also central to how the study's participants came to understand and accept their sexuality. Intimate encounters helped to articulate desires, navigate boundaries, and shape embodied understanding of sexuality, even when initial experiences were marked by secrecy or discomfort. For some, emotional, (non-)sexual queer bonds (e.g. chosen family) played a formative role in the stabilisation of one's identity.

The process of 'coming in' marks a pivotal step towards self-recognition. Instead of focusing on public disclosure, 'coming in' emphasises internal acceptance, empowerment, and a growing sense of alignment with oneself. Besides quiet acts of self-affirmation, this inner shift is often seen outwardly through expression in various forms: Art, performance, activism, and entrepreneurship. Despite enduring societal constraints, the participants' narratives demonstrate

how embracing one's sexuality can become a powerful and transformative source of personal strength.

In sum, the participants construct their sexual identities through an evolving interplay of personal reflection, structural barriers, and relational support. Identity is not simply discovered but negotiated, reconfigured, and performed in response to the intersecting forces of social stigma, cultural expectations, familial obligations, and community belonging.

Negotiating Disclosure

The process of disclosing one's sexual identity within familial, social, and cultural contexts is complex, ongoing, and deeply individual. Drawing on participants' narratives, it was examined when, to whom, and how individuals chose to come out or refrained from doing so and how these decisions were shaped by their individual social environments, influenced by societal heteronormativity, family expectations, and the perceived threat of discrimination. While some individuals choose to live openly, others engage in selective disclosure or employ indirect forms of signalling, underscoring the emotional and relational complexities involved in navigating queer visibility. The narratives also revealed a culturally embedded alternative to dominant coming out models – referred as 'coming with' – which illustrates how GBQ individuals can manage and express aspects of their identity in ways that maintain familial bonds.

Coming out was a common experience among all participants yet occurred in highly selective and strategic ways. Only three out of ten participants were fully open about their sexual identities across familial and societal contexts. The majority practiced selective disclosure, choosing to share their identities only with trusted individuals while non-disclosing their sexuality to parents, extended family, or the broader community. This selective coming out pattern highlights the calculated and context-dependent nature of queer visibility within a heteronormative environment.

Initial disclosures occurred in emotionally safe relationships. Participants often first came out to close friends, people they felt romantically attracted to and siblings as well as cousins.

Parental disclosure among my participants was rare and highly emotionally charged, as family settings were often shaped by heteronormative expectations (see subchapter *Navigating Social Spaces*). Only two participants had come out directly to their parents and were met with (gradual) acceptance and support, while most others either delay disclosure to avoid expected rejection, emotional hurt and/or loss of family support or practiced strategic silence or indirect signalling. Others considered disclosure as a future possibility once emotionally and financially independent.

Heterosexism and discrimination influences coming out decisions. Participants cited fear of societal rejection and concerns for their own safety. These fears led to closeted or semi-closeted lives, especially during school times, in public or professional settings. Anticipated and experienced discrimination made participants cautious, often leading to delayed or partial disclosures.

An alternative to coming out as a bold, singular act, emerged among the participants, which is the more nuanced process of ‘coming with’. This approach, mainly implemented in familial environments, involved indirect, relational strategies, such as introducing partners as friends, educating and discussing about queer-related topics and/or subtly expressing queerness through appearance and/or interests/hobbies. Some participants directed such tactics of ‘coming with’ towards family members and peers, preserving socially important ties while avoiding direct confrontation. ‘Coming with’ aims to align the possibly conflicting need for social bonds and belonging with the need for authenticity, visibility, and self-expression. It can be described as a process of gradually carving out space for queer existence while actively working to reshape and align societal norms with queer necessities.

Participants described a wide range emotional experiences in relation to their sexual identity and familial dynamics. For some, positive disclosure experiences were described as liberating, validating, and even transformative, offering a profound sense of relief and self-affirmation. Others recounted ongoing feelings of fear, anxiety, and emotional ambivalence, thereby underscoring the tension between self-expression and the risk of rejection. Among those who had not fully come out, there was a strong, recurring desire for recognition and authenticity often carefully balanced with deeply ingrained social and familial expectations.

In conclusion, coming out among the participants is deeply contextual, emotional, and strategic. Decisions to (non-)disclosure are shaped by relational dynamics, societal and familial heteronormativity, and fears of discrimination. While full openness remains rare, participants find ways to live more authentically through selective disclosure and culturally adapted practices like ‘coming with’. These strategies underscore the constraints and resilience of GBQ individuals navigating complex social environments.

Summary

Across families, schools, universities and workplaces, participants managed deeply entrenched gendered and heteronormative values that defined respectability and belonging. The tension between personal authenticity and collective expectations was ever-present in their lives and often gave rise to inner conflict. Yet within these structures, participants cultivated forms of resistance and transformation, some quiet and strategic, others bold and open, asserting their

identities through acts of care, creativity, connection, and entrepreneurship, therefore refusing to be wholly defined by normative pressures. Many expressed their sexual identities through their interactions, outward appearance, and behaviours. Notwithstanding the pressure to conform, participants increasingly embraced fluid and authentic ways of self. These acts of resilience and resistance, whether subtle or overt, reflect how GBQ individuals challenge rigid binaries and reclaim agency over their gender and sexuality.

5 Conclusion

The study has aimed to shed light on how societal and familial structures, values, ideals, and norms in Nepal profoundly shape not only public perceptions of GBQ individuals but also their ways of being and navigating the world.

Something that stood out in particular, though not always addressed directly in earlier chapters, was the strong presence of individuals actively working towards progressive change in Nepali society. During the discussion on *Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes*, I witnessed how participants – including queer law students and activists affiliated with organisations like BDSN – saw their professional paths as part of a broader struggle for social justice. Some attendees remarked that legal advocacy was the only chance for change in the country (see Observation Protocol 2024: Discussion on “Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes”). Also, participants of this study, such as Ajit, Anush, Dhirendra, Sabin and Shreya, are engaged in efforts through organisational work, educational outreach, and public discourse. Their courage in naming challenges and speaking openly – on talk shows, in workshops, within community forums – demonstrates a growing confidence and refusal to remain silent. Social change at the micro level occurs through processes of ‘coming with’, in which participants engage in subtle ways of queering their surrounding by sensibilizing, for instance, their parents to queer-related topics. In doing so, they gradually carve out space for themselves and contribute to change within a society where PoMSOGIESC+ individuals are largely marginalized or rendered invisible.

The ongoing progress in Nepali society is also reflected in the increasing number of (N)GOs actively advocating for PoMSOGIESC+ community. These organisations initiate workshops, discussions, art events, and media projects aimed at facilitating dialogue between queer individuals and the broader public, ultimately promoting greater mutual understanding and to spread awareness. In recent years, the annual Pride Parade has expanded beyond Kathmandu Valley, taking place in other cities, for example, in Pokhara since 2022 and in Hetauda since 2024.

Many participants further reflected on gradual and noticeable shifts in social attitudes. Dhirendra observed a slow and positive change in educational spaces becoming more diverse and inclusive, including improvements in sexual education (see Dhirendra 2024: Transcript 2, 3.3). Anush pointed to increased access to education as a contributing factor to more open-mindedness within society (see Anush 2024: Transcript 1). Anil shared a reflection on the significance of mindset. While his parents are highly educated and socially influential, he stressed that acceptance came not from education alone, but from willingness to challenge long-

held beliefs (see Anil 2024: Transcript 1). Bikram expressed pride in Nepal's relative tolerance and pointing to growing political discourse surrounding PoMSOGIESC+ rights, particularly in relation to same-sex marriage and equality for sexual and gender minorities (see Bikram 2024: Transcript 1).

Despite all the challenges GBQ individuals in this study face, a hopeful outlook emerged: Participants conveyed a sense optimism about the future of PoMSOGIESC+ acceptance in Nepal and expressed a growing belief in the possibility of gradual societal transformation. In this study, they are visible as agents of change whether in subtle ways, impacting their direct social environment through tactics of 'coming with', or more openly and direct through activism.

This study paves the way for future research. Subsequent studies might examine intersectional dynamics in greater detail, investigating how gender, caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic and educational backgrounds intersect with queerness to shape the lived experiences of sexual and gender minorities in diverse ways. Furthermore, future research could explore the differences in PoMSOGIESC+ experiences between rural and urban contexts, thereby shedding light on how different environments settings influence the daily lives of queer individuals. Another direction for future research would be to explore how the experiences of PoMSOGIESC+ individuals differ between those who move within the 'old school' PoMSOGIESC+ movement and those aligned with the newer, secular wave. This could include not only an examination of everyday experiences but also an analysis of the variances between forms of activism across these two strands of the movement.

At last, to conclude this thesis, I want to mention that I am fully aware that I could only capture a fragment of the diverse experiences within Nepal's PoMSOGIESC+ community – specifically, those who chose to share their stories with me. Offering a comprehensive picture of queer life in Nepal was neither the intention nor a realistic expectation of this study, such a task would be impossible in any ethnographic context. Still, I have sought to identify and present shared patterns and experiences that may resonate beyond the individuals I interviewed, and which might speak to broader dynamics within the community. As someone who is not Nepali, who did not grow up in this society, and who is not fully identifying as queer, I cannot entirely relate to or comprehend the realities my participants live through. However, throughout this research, I made a conscious effort to listen carefully, to reflect thoughtfully and tried to place myself in their shoes as much as possible. When I look back on the months I spent in the field, what stays with me most is not the hard work, the intensive planning, and the challenges I faced, but the encounters, conversations, and moments of connection that have left a lasting

impression on me. I was welcomed into a community that did not merely see me as a visitor from Europe, but invited me into their lives, not only as a researcher, but sometimes also as a friend. Many of these relationships grew into genuine bonds that extended far beyond the scope of this research and continue to exist today. I am incredibly grateful for all of this and carry that appreciation with me.

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Interview Guideline

Note in advance

This is a preliminary interview guide with many topics that can be covered in this research project. It is not mandatory to address every single question/topic. The participant should only share what he/she/they feel/s comfortable sharing.

The interview is divided into three parts. We can hold separate session for each part to avoid any time pressure, or we can do everything in a single session, depending on what the participant prefers.

Part 1: Introduction and childhood

1. I introduce myself as the researcher and again explain the outline of this study.
2. You will introduce yourself: Name, age, pronouns, sexual orientation (only if you feel comfortable), where you live (name of village/town/city is enough) and how you live (alone, with family, friends, partner), occupation
3. Then I'll ask you to tell me what you remember from your childhood and if you could take me through it:
 - a. Where did you grow up? What did you play, with whom and where did you hang out?
 - b. What was your family constellation growing up? How was your relationship to your mother, father, siblings, other relatives? What was your father's daily occupation? What was your mother's daily occupation? Who was the breadwinner and who did all the household?
 - c. Who took most care of you? With whom did you feel comfortable? Who could you rely on?
 - d. Did your parents (and further relatives) have any expectations for you during your childhood? Do you remember any family values that were instilled in you at an early age?

Part 2: School/Teenage, Adolescence Years

1. First of all, I give broad opening questions: Can you take me through your adolescence years? Where did you live? Where did you go to school? How was school like and how did you feel there?
2. Then, after your initial account of your teenage years, I might ask more specific questions:

- a. At what age did you realize you don't feel like a boy/girl? (If you consider yourself non-binary and/or trans)
 - b. What are your first experiences of feeling attracted to someone? Was it a boy or a girl? At what age?
 - c. Did you explore your sexuality/gender further already in teenage years? If so, how? If you want, tell me about your first romantic/physical interaction/relationship?
 - d. Who were you closest with at that time? How was your friends circle?
 - e. Did you open up to someone about your gender and/or sexual orientation in your friend's circle?
3. After that, I turn to your family again and I'll ask you how your relationship with your family was in your teenage years.
4. I might ask further questions then:
 - a. How was your relationship to your father/mother/siblings? Who were you closest with? Who took care of you? What was your siblings' lifestyle?
 - b. Did your parents (and further relatives) have any expectations for you during your adolescence years? Do you remember any family values that were lived in your home and instilled in you?
 - c. Was marriage already a topic?
 - d. Could you tell me about religious and other traditional values that describe your family best?

Part 3: Adulthood and possible Coming Out

1. Now I turn to your adulthood with opening questions such as, what have you done since finishing school/college/university? How is your life like these days? How is your living situation?
2. Then I turn to your coming out process:
 - a. Have you come out to anyone?
 - i. Yes (partly): Why did you feel like you needed to tell someone? Who did you decide to say it to? Why?
Can you tell me the story of coming out to your friends/parent(s)/sibling(s)/relative(s)? How did they respond? How did it feel afterwards? Does it feel right to have come out? Has coming out affected your relationship with your family?

- ii. No: Why have you decided not to disclose yourself? Have you found other ways to express your gender and sexuality without the process of coming out to your family? (Like moving away, living alone, living your queer life in a hidden way?)
- b. In what way did your decision to (not) come out help/not help to become the person you are today?
- c. Would you make the same decision today if you had known what the aftermath of your disclosure would be?
- d. Why is it difficult in the Nepali society to openly come out? Are there other ways to handle gender and sexual orientation?

Interview Protocols and Transcripts

Participant Aahan

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+in Nepal

Interview audio ID: I1_Aahan_20240627_IA1

Interviewee: Aahan, male, age 25

Duration: 00:26:53

Location, Time: Kathmandu, 27.06.2024 at 8.45 pm

Type: Interview via Zoom

Method: Semi-structured interview

Aahan's residence: Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Drag Queen Performer, Tour guide

First encounter: I first saw Aahan perform as a drag queen (called MomoLicca) at a Drag Show/Contest on June 21, 2024, at the Hard Rock Café, where he won the contest.

Initial contact: Following the performance, I began following him on Instagram, as well as his business “Queer Mandu”, which offers queer guided tours in Kathmandu and beyond the Kathmandu Valley.

Communication: On the morning of June 27, 2024, I sent him a message on Instagram, expressing that I enjoyed his performance and would like to connect with him. He responded quickly, providing his phone number and asking me to call him.

Scheduling the Interview: That afternoon, I called him, and he mentioned that he was very busy these days and preferred to start and complete the interview the same day, in the evening, via Zoom. I agreed and sent him a Zoom link for 8.45 pm.

Setting: Aahan was at a friend's house, sitting or rather lying on a green sofa – that is all what I saw. He participated in the Zoom call using his mobile phone.

Initial Plan: I intended to start with a narrative interview. Introduced myself and the research project, then asked if he could introduce himself, guide me through his childhood and adolescence, sharing his memories, how he grew up, and when he realized he was queer.

Change in Approach: However, Aahan quickly requested that I ask him specific questions instead of open-ended ones, as he did not have much time. Consequently, I switched to a structured interview with explicit questions. Due to the lack of preparation for this shift, I had to improvise.

Interview Dynamics: Aahan responded to each question very quickly. After approximately 25 minutes, he indicated that he no longer had time. He appeared somewhat disinterested and in a hurry.

Conclusion: We concluded the interview with a brief thank you and goodbye. Unfortunately, the interview did not go as smoothly as planned.

Transcript 1

Date: 27.06.2024

Duration: 00:26:52

Interviewee: Ahaan

Audio File: I1_Aahan_20240627_IA1

I: MS

A: Aahan

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00:00:00 Introduction and current life situation

00:04:21 Childhood memories and family structure

00:05:54 Significance of religion and tradition during childhood and teenage years

00:07:08 Teenage life, struggles and first same-sex attraction

00:10:55 First encounter with other queer people

00:12:45 Coming out

00:14:13 Expectations from his mother

00:16:03 How did the coming out experience has helped to shape identity

00:19:37 How it is like to be drag in Nepal

00:22:14 Casual conversation

00:00:00

I: Hello.

A: Hello.

I: Do you hear me good?

A: Yes.

I: Okay.

A: Hello.

I: Hello. Yes, I hear you.

A: Hi.

I: Hi. Nice to meet you.

A: Yes, same here. Sorry for a little bit inconvenience. I literally travel so fast just for this.

I: Thank you so much. I hope everything worked out with the work you had to do.

A: Yes, yes. Yes, I finished early but the traffic was worse.

I: Okay, yeah, I can imagine. So, yeah, thanks again for having time for me. So, yeah, let me shortly explain again what this is about. So, I'm trying to find out more about coming out stories and outing stories of queer individuals in Nepal as I am working at the South Asian Institute for University of Vienna in Austria. And I'm interested in how and when queer people in the valley or in the community here have realized being queer and how close people like family, relatives, friends, schoolmates or at work reacted to eventually coming out. And I'd also be interested, especially while talking to you, how you became a performer. And how people in your surrounding perceived it.

A: Yes, let's do it this way. So, I don't want to talk and make it long. So, I know these things about me. Obviously, I'm talking about me. So, I would definitely know. You can start me with the exact question. Like a particular question so it's easier for me to answer.

I: Okay. So, first of all, tell me about yourself. What is your name? What is your age and your occupation?

A: Okay. My name is Aahan. My full name. I do drag as well. So, in drag I use the name called MomoLicca. I'm 25 years old. I'm originally from Chitwan but it's been 7 years that I'm living in Kathmandu. And my profession right now, my only profession is a tourist guide. I'm also one of the few people in queer tourism in Nepal. I have my own company called Queer Mandu which caters to queer tourists. Yeah.

I: And would you mind me asking where you live and how you live? Are you living alone or...?

A: I won't be for so long. So, my mom and my sister are sitting here in 2 weeks from Chitwan. So, I'll be living with them after 2 weeks. But for now, I live alone.

I: Okay. I see.

A: But here I'm at my friend's place. That's why not today. But normally I live alone.

I: Okay. I see. I see.

00:04:21

I: So, can you shortly say how your childhood was like?

A: I grew up in a joint family. Even though I didn't have a father because I had a lot of family members. Yeah. The upbringing was pretty much okay-ish. Nothing special. We were in a lower middle-class family. So, we didn't get a lot of things we wanted. Especially me and my sister because my cousins, they had their parents. I became the man of the family, right? So, my mom and my sister. So, I left my home pretty early. When I was 15, I thought about running away or moving out, because knowing about your sexuality is harder in a very small village. So, I finished my 12th standard and by then I was 16 and I moved out. I didn't particularly like my childhood, but I do have some amazing memories.

I: Okay. I see. I see. Who took care of you the most? Your mother or your sister?

A: Yeah. My mom. Your mom.

I: Okay. So, your mom was your closest person?

A: Well, throughout my life, yes. You can say that.

00:05:54

I: And was religion and traditional rituals and values a big part of your childhood and teenage life?

A: Yeah, absolutely. Especially my childhood. So, when I moved out like 7 years ago, 8 years ago from my home. So, I kind of like made myself distant from all those stuff, religion. I'm not a religious person. Neither I follow much of a tradition. But like, yeah, when I was growing up, I would follow a lot of them. Out of questioning because everyone around me is doing it. So, yeah, like me having my identity is somehow I lost my connection with the faith and religion. Yeah, I would say so. But I'm a little bit spiritual. I wouldn't say I have given up all of what my family and my friends taught me. I do have like bits and pieces of me. But as in like a God or tradition as in whole that I have to do this that I don't do.

I: Okay, okay. I see.

00:07:08

I: And how was your teenager life and your school life like?

A: Teenager life, I mean, I was good at academics. I came first in most of the time until I passed grade 10. Then I was because I studied in like a government school where we would have like only one English language and other languages in Nepali. So, when I finished my 10th, then I got a scholarship, and I went to a college where everything was in English. So, for the first time, I was learning science and history and like literature in English. Throughout my life, I never studied that. So, that was a challenge and I lost my confidence there. I somehow managed it because I passed with like 70 percent, which is a good mark still. But I used to score 85, 86 percent. So, that degradation, also the financial problem, also my hormones, you know, increasing, me starting to, you know, like feeling, catch feeling for straight guys. So, yeah, teenager, I would say was, well, teenager was my worst part of my life. I would say, honestly, like after 20, I somehow have managed control over my life, be it financially, emotionally or accepting myself. I would say like this is right now, this is the most confident and most independent I've ever been. But financially and emotionally, teenage years were the worst ones.

I: Okay, I see.

I: You were shortly mentioning that your hormones and that you first felt attracted to a straight guy. At what age was that?

A: I mean, I wouldn't particularly say like a one particular straight person because I never know whether they are straight or not. I wouldn't go to and like ask them, hey, do you like me or whatever. But back then, I didn't have a phone. I didn't have a, well, growing up, I never had a gay friend, like honestly, because I didn't find anyone in the village. I knew some people, but they were way too feminine that I would not encourage myself to go and talk to them. So, growing up, I literally had like no gay friend until I was like 17 or 18, no gay friend. So, yeah, I mean, at the age of 12, 13, you know, like you want to copy what a hero is doing in a movie. So, basically like influenced by the movies, by the music, you want to feel that main character energy. You want to feel that you're in love. But sadly, the reference were not there. I didn't see anyone on the TV, neither in real life to get inspired from.

I: Yes.

A: And you know what, like, yeah, I can fall in love like that person likes me. And also I was lonely at that time, which I don't mind. But now I think back, actually, that also will harm your psyche, you know, like to think that you're the only one.

I: Yes.

A: And now with the mobile and everything, the today's kids are like so lucky. But I am the last generation of that kid.

I: Yes.

A: The teenage kid who didn't have a phone and the last generation, honestly. Oh, like, no, other people had phones, but like I got a little bit late. But you know what I mean? Like, I was in the birth of the generational gap.

I: I see.

00:10:55

I: So, who was or when was the first time you were talking about being queer with another person?

A: Honestly, I don't even remember. So basically, I think – wait, nice question. I never thought about it. The first queer friends were the ones I made here in Kathmandu when I was 17 in 2000, whatever, 18 or something. I was 17 years old back then. But my first encounter with the queer people would obviously it's for hook up. It's for sex. I became active since 16. So, I think the first ones were from like this culture of creating a Facebook, but it's like a fake profile, not the real one. And we would search, you know, in the Facebook like a gay sex or like a male love or whatever. I don't even remember what I typed back then. But like, and if you see the picture and you go to the like or comment, wherever they commented. They also would have like a picture, and we would chat with them. That's how like we communicated back then because we didn't have like dating apps and stuff. I didn't know the ... (unintelligible) and whatever. So, Facebook would be the first interaction with another queer person I did. And that was mostly for raunchy, naughty sexual stuff, like nothing for like a friendship.

I: I see, I see.

00:12:45

I: And do you mind asking if you came out to family members?

A: Yeah, I was 17 years old. I came out to my mom through phone. I just called her. I was in Kathmandu, she was in Chitwan, and I told her. And then later I told my sister and the other like our relatives and family members, cousins. So now everyone knows. It's like I never got the clarity because I think my mom and sister are fine with it now. Now I see like they're okay. But back then it was like, mom, I'm gay. And it's like, okay. Like the conversation itself was like not fulfilling or like I didn't take away anything from out of it. Like she was obviously disgusted. But she didn't say anything like too bad that I now think that she would deny me. So, she was not shocked as well because I have been pretty gay all my life. So, I would say like I'm one of the lucky ones that my mother doesn't hate me for it. But she will take some time to accept it. And I'm honestly ready to give her some time.

I: I see.

A: Even if eight years, she might ask me for another eight years, I have to give her (laughs).

I: Again, yeah.

00:14:13

I: And do you know what her expectations were of your life before she knew?

A: I mean, well, before or after?

I: Maybe both?

A: Well, I would definitely say the way she would look at me or like she would think of me had changed totally. And it has like both aspects. I mean, like now I know like she thinks that I'm more confident. That I've like, you know, like shut down all the like bad people around me. I've taken charge of my life. She has told me to do like a thousand different kind of jobs. But I'm doing what I like to do, like tourism and stuff like that. And now I've also shown her pictures of me doing drag. So, I think she definitely thinks that I've gotten out of the hand, but I also think that she also is proud of me that I am following my dreams. And I basically I talk the talk and walk the walk. Like I just don't make plans and sit around. I actually act on it. And she also knows that I am smart enough and hardworking enough that I can take care of myself and probably herself as well. So, she somehow is not saying, but she actually is proud that I'm independent.

I: I see.

A: For three of us. I can look after myself, my sister and my mom right now. And I think that matters to them a lot, because at the end of the day, that's what you want.

00:16:04

I: So, I have two more questions and then we're done. So, in what way did the coming out experience help or not help you become the person you are today?

A: Mhm. Again, like it has multiple facets, right? Now I think about it, the bigger picture, if I have to talk about the bigger picture. I am glad that I opened up. Honestly, I'm glad because I can see there are so many discreet people around me. I also worked for USAID for the HIV test work. Mostly I worked for a straight acting, discreet and very low confident gay people and queer people. And if I think about it now, I was like them. And if I didn't open up, I would end up like them, because how you become has a lot to do with the people that you put around yourself. And once you're open, you make the open friends. Once you close it, you make the closeted friends. And not all the closeted friends are the creative and smart people. Smart gay people are, even though they have the smaller circle, they're always the open ones. The discreet

gays always have something to hide. I know some people have their own limitations. But if you look around, the most creative, the most smart, the most hardworking, the ones that have the positive influence are the open ones. So, now I think about it, I'm glad that I'm open because now I'm running my tour agency with a friend of mine, two friends of mine who are also queer. So, that is possible just because I opened up. I cannot run a gay company saying that I'm straight. That is one thing.

Another thing is, I think it has some bad influence as well. For example, it has definitely impacted on my earlier days of opening up because I did get a lot of criticism. I had low confidence. Now it's becoming easier, but in the initial days, like six years ago, I remember, a lot of guys that I liked didn't want to date me because I was open. And me being open is like, if someone sees them with me, they will also think that they're a queer. So that fear of being seen with another queer person was huge, which actually is like, I don't know how it went away because that was a big issue in my life.

Now I don't think it happens nowadays. I think a lot of people are opened up now. Also, as I told you, I changed my circle. I changed my friend's circle. I am around open people now mostly. So yeah, it has both advantages and disadvantages. But honestly, if you think the disadvantages also turn into advantages. So, I encourage everyone to open up. Basically, you don't need to make an announcement, but the people around you who matter, your friends, close friends, your family, the ones who need to know should know.

I: Yeah, I'm with you in that.

00:19:37

I: So, when did you start with drag performance and how did your surroundings react to that?

A: It has changed completely, honestly. So, I was first introduced to drag, like honestly, I'm not going to lie, it was RuPaul's obviously. Just working, just scrolling on Instagram, I would see some clips from the series. And I was like, what is this? Like, oh my God, this is amazing. They're dressing nice. And then I went and started watching it, I became obsessed, like so obsessed that I watch every single nowadays. And then I always like, now I think back, like I always used to be a bit feminine, but I somehow suppressed that throughout my college and school days. When I was a child, I would literally wear, you know, the skirt, like a sari, whatever my mom and my sister had. I would literally wear that and run around the town. And that's how everyone knew that I was queer from like early, early age. And in this school, I know like becoming a teenager, I did suppress that. And now I thought about it like three years ago, it was

Halloween, and I wanted to do something silly because I wanted to, you know, like, people to laugh at me and like to laugh at myself. So, I dressed up as Dora the Explorer and that's how my drag journey started. So, that was an excuse in Halloween. I wanted to look like a woman, so I became a Dora. But that excuse, like then after I started doing small ones and now like I'm one of the renowned drag queens of Nepal. There are many, but like I recently won this small competition as well. So, a lot of people want to see me, and I also love to perform. Obviously drag is expensive, but I somehow manage whatever my creativity or the resources I have. But I love doing it and I want to continue in the future as well. But I know that drag in Nepal cannot be the full career and I want to keep it that way as well. I want to do like a side hustle or like, even if it's for fun, I want to do it. But for me, the drag is not dressing up or like showing my artistry. It's mostly about reclaiming my femininity and my creativity.

I: I see, I see. Thanks for telling me so much.

00:22:14

A: You're welcome.

I: And yes, I saw your show last Friday.

A: Oh, you were there?

I: Yes, I was there.

A: Were you the one who I bumped into?

I: No, no, I was sitting at the bar. I was like right in the back. I was all by myself. So, no, no, we did not talk.

A: There was one girl of your age who approached me for an interview. But I said like I'm busy, later and then she totally disappeared. I thought it was you.

I: No.

A: Yeah, I was in drag, and I was in a hurry. But she caught me and like she was asking for a photo. But I had to change and again come back for another. So, I could not say yes, but I couldn't even see her face. But it was a white woman in their 30s. So, I don't know who it was.

I: No, no, it wasn't me. And yes, I'm also planning on booking a tour. I already know about your Queer Mandu. And I checked the program.

A: Which did you like the most?

I: I did a small research a couple of months back about queer temple art and sex temple art.

A: Oh, wow, yeah.

I: So, I'm thinking about doing this.

A: How many temples have you gone around?

I: No, I was just like doing it. It was a literature-based research only because back then I was in Europe. So, it was from old photography.

A: We've got one tour literally only for that. We call it Kathmandu from Queer Eye.

I: Yes.

A: And there are so many icons around. Obviously, that is the one we put it. But if you are comfortable traveling from a taxi that we book online and we can customize, then we can also bring it down a little bit. That is for our rich guests' price.

I: Yes, okay. I see, I see. Yes. And I also normally get around with inDrive and Pathao and stuff like that. So, yes. I will definitely get in touch for that with you again.

A: Sure, sure, sure.

I: As soon as I have a bit more time. Yes, I mean I'm staying here until October. So, there will be enough time for that.

A: Yeah, obviously.

I: Do you have any more questions regarding myself?

A: Honestly, no. Because I know it's for a good purpose. I've given out interviews to students as well for their university.

They are doing some research. And most of the time I've got the same answer. That's why I said you can just ask me questions because I've probably answered that multiple times.

I: Yes, okay.

A: That's what I said.

I: Okay.

A: I'm actually giving out another interview next week. But that is not about me. That is about queer people in tourism. But that is still me. But that's a different topic we have never talked about openly.

I: Yes.

A: So, I'm excited for that as well. And I have to think how much I can contribute on that. Because this is off-season, you know, Nepal tourism is like a seasonal off-season. So, that's why I'm doing all this drag and stuff, you know, the competing and everything. Because I'm free now. And by mid-September we are all busy again.

I: Yes.

A: Until the winter, January.

I: And then you have a gap again and then the tourists are coming again.

A: It's literally like that. It's like seven months work and five months of vacation.

I: Yes, it sounds stressful. The time. The tourist time, I can imagine.

A: Yes.

I: Okay. So, I leave you alone now and have a good rest and a nice evening.

A: You too.

I: Thank you so much. And probably see you around sometime.

A: Sure, sure, sure. Anyways, happy pride month.

I: Yes, happy pride month. Good night. Bye-bye.

Participant Ajit

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I3_Ajit_20240707_IA1

Interviewee: Ajit, male, 26

Duration: 00:04:40

Location, Time: Kathmandu and Nepalgunj, 07.07.2024 at 5.30 pm

Type: Interview via phone call

Method: Informal dialogue

Ajit's residence: Nepalgunj, Lumbini Province

Occupation: Computer and Social Scientist, Governance Mentor, Queer Ambassador, Poet

Introduction: I got to know Ajit through Niranjana Kunwar's help. Niranjana is a well-known openly gay educator and author in Nepal, whom I met through my German friend Ben, who has been living and working in Nepal for nine years. I told Niranjana about my project, and he shared information about that with the Gehendra Dhimal Foundation, which works, among other things, for the rights and support of queer individuals. Ajit, who was trained as a Queer Ambassador by the Gehendra Dhimal Foundation, reached out to me via email, expressing his interest in participating in my project and sharing his experiences as a queer person living in western Nepal.

Initial contact: Ajit sent me his phone number, and I contacted him on WhatsApp. We had a video call on June 27th at 6.30 pm. The conversation was very relaxed and informal, almost friendly. Since Ajit lives in Nepalgunj and also currently works in Surkhet, our initial contact has been over the phone, but we plan to meet in person in Kathmandu in mid-August to conduct interviews and spend time together.

Ongoing Communication: Since the end of June, Ajit and I have been in regular contact, talking about once a week and updating each other. During one of these calls on July 7th, I explained the interviewing process to him. He already then shared a short anecdote from his childhood, which I was allowed to record. He spoke freely and comfortably, mentioning that he would try to recall more childhood memories to share in future conversations, whether informal dialogues or formal interview sessions.

Observations and Impressions: The exchange between Ajit and me feels very casual. He enjoys sharing stories with me and seems very relaxed during our conversations. Ajit's willingness to

share experiences openly indicates a level of trust and comfort that is valuable for the depth and quality of the interviews.

Further Steps: In mid-August we plan to meet in Kathmandu. Until then we continue our weekly updates and informal conversations via phone calls.

Transcript 1

Date: 07.07.2024

Duration: 00:04:40 (only half transcribed)

Interviewee: Ajit

Audio File: I3_Ajit_20240707_IA1

I: MS

A: Ajit

0:00:00

A: In my neighborhood, we used to watch TV and there was an ad with children and I was singing the song of that ad along with the children in the TV and she (his mum) just literally said: "Don't behave like that, so feminine, you are acting like a girl!" My face got all red because of the shame and there were people around us when I was told so. There are lots of incidents that happened that questioned my personality. I used to struggle to think of how I have to operate myself around people, then I had to suppress my expression so that only masculine side of me was seen. So that nobody could just comment on me and my expression. Since then, I used to hesitate singing. I used to be such a bad kid, singing along everything that used to come on TV. But after that incident, I did not just sing anything. I think, I could help you picturize this incident.

I: Yes, I am so sorry to hear that that has happened to you. You were still a child. And I mean, children are children, and they should have fun.

A: As far as I remember, I was 9 or 10 years old. We used to watch TV with people around.

Protocol 2

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I3_Ajit_20240815_IA2

Interviewee: Ajit, male, age 26

Duration: 00:52:27

Location, Time: Patan, Lalitpur, 15.08.2024 at 1.30 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Ajit's residence: Nepalgunj, Lumbini Province

Occupation: Computer Scientist and Scientist, Governance Mentor, Queer Ambassador, Poet

Introduction: On August 14th, I arranged for Ajit to fly from Nepalgunj to Kathmandu so that we could meet in person, spend some time together, and conduct both informal conversations and formal interviews. This initial meeting aimed to build rapport and create a comfortable environment for the upcoming interviews.

Arrival and Initial Interaction: Ajit arrived in Kathmandu around midday, and I picked him up at the airport. I took him to his hotel, Kumari Inn, which I also arranged and where he settled in. We spent the rest of the day together, getting to know each other better through informal talks. This time was essential to establish trust and understanding before the formal interview sessions.

Pre-Interview Meeting in Patan: On the day of the interview, August 15th, we arranged to meet in Patan near Durbar Square at 12.00 pm. We began by having coffee and engaging in casual conversation, which helped to further ease any potential tension and set a relaxed tone for the interview.

Interview Setting: After our coffee, we moved to a small, old temple across from the café to conduct the interview. This location was chosen for its privacy and the shade it offered from the hot sun, providing a conducive environment for an in-depth conversation.

Content of the Interview: Ajit had previously shared a lot about himself and his experiences as a queer person, but I asked him to provide a more detailed account during the interview. I began with a brief introduction and then invited him to talk about his childhood and adolescence, his family, and how he became aware of his homosexuality. Ajit spoke for just under an hour, sharing his experiences in an enthusiastic and detailed manner. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, allowing for an open and honest dialogue.

Conclusion: We decided to pause the interview as both of us were getting hungry. We agreed to continue the rest of the interview the following day, ensuring that we would have ample time to cover all the necessary topics without rushing.

Transcript 2

Date: 15.08.2024

Duration: 00:52:26

Interviewee: Ajit

Audio File: I3_Ajit_20240815_IA2

I: MS

A: Ajit

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00:00:00

I: So, I start, if it's alright? Is it okay, if you hold it like this?

A: Yes. I am very comfortable.

I: Can you first introduce yourself? Your name, your age, your pronouns, your occupation and where you live?

A: Yea, sure. Hi, Marie. This is me, Ajit. I live in Nepalgunj, Banke district from Nepal. I am 26 years old. September born, a libra. My pronouns are he/him. I work for one of the intergovernmental organizations. That is called IDEA, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. And then, again, I am working there as a governance mentor. I support the local government system. Apart from my work, I want to pursue my masters in Gender Studies or Governance. I do writing as well, I do the translation work and transcripts as well at the same time. If you ask me what I could obtain, what I could do more would be the ability to know and learn to speak every language in the world. Apart from that, I love dancing, I love singing. I am more into old songs, old Bollywood songs. I am a big time Beatles fan. I love Rock'n'roll and I love classical Nepali songs. Apart from that other hobbies I want to explore would be arts, I really, really want to do art, because I don't even know the a of art. But I want to learn and apart from that I actually, genuinely want to learn knitting.

I: Oh wow!

A: Yea, I want to learn that. So, yea, that's about me.

I: So much! So many things you want to do and want to achieve! That's so nice!

A: So, maybe I just don't want to stop in my life. I just want to keep on walking and learning. Even though, at times, apart from that I strongly advocate for HIV, because the social stigma and discrimination that lies in this world even though we are moving in like almost – we are in the 21st century and there still is stigma against sex and sex education. There are stigma against mental health. So, I strongly advocate for mental health and HIV prevention and treatment. And I actually hope that if it is possible I want have an egalitarian society where everybody is treated equally and with kindness and I hope, there is no war. Yea, that's all. I know, being always happy is an utopia but then again, people are at peace even if they are sad. Yea, that's all.

I: And I mean, it is also a nice aim to have like striving for just being happy.

A: Yea.

I: And not striving for being rich.

A: Yea, being wealthier.

I: Or striving for a huge mansion.

A: Yea.

I: Or whatever. Just like striving for being happy with what you have.

A: I would like to believe the best thing, the legacy that you can leave behind would not be any materialistic thing but rather how you make other people feel and how you actually treat them.

I: That is very important.

A: Yea, that is very important, I think, in my opinion.

00:04:57

I: So, could you tell me a bit about your childhood? Could you take me through your childhood memories, whatever comes to your mind. As detailed as possible, that would be awesome.

A: Yea, sure.

I: And I would also like to know a bit about your family setting, how you grew up, where exactly you grew up, who was part of your family back then? Yes, just go ahead with whatever comes to your mind.

A: Okay. So, I was born and brought up in Nepalgunj itself where my family resides. I have a mother, father, one elder brother and one sister. Both of them are married. I come from a Hindu-Brahmanical conservative Nepali family, a middle working-class family. My parents never had proper education, and I am the first who graduated in my family. While growing up, one thing that I remember is, financially we had to struggle a lot, but we got each other's back. Apart from that, I must say I had a brilliant childhood. There are good sides and bad sides of everything. I also might have had a lot of traumas or more like incidents that made me feel bad, but the other good things always prevailed and that also because of the strong dynamics of my siblings. My sister and my brother, we always used to hang out and study, prepare for exams and we used to get beaten by our mother once in a while, just for the character development, just like any other Nepali mother. My father is a retired man now, but my father and mother used to work in a government hospital in Nepalgunj. Since I come from Brahmin family, my father is also engaged in ritual things as working as a priest. He works in temples and for

different religious things as well. One thing that I have always carried out with myself that I always should have focus on my studies. Because from a not so well off family, the only thing that could make our life easier was only education. That was the only mechanism we had. I remember from my childhood, I think, that is still available, that is called मूना, it's a child book. It's a child magazine in fact. Our father used to bring मूना किताब (kitab/Buch) every month, since it was published every month. We used to read all together while doing puzzles. My siblings and me, we used to sit together and do puzzles and read poems and read stories and make lots of activities. We used to engage in मूना किताब. Reading मूना किताब actually enhanced my curiosity regarding books. I still have that hobby to read books. Even though I may not read all the time, I may not be an avid reader, but I love books. I like reading and knowing things, that actually fascinates me. Another thing that is still prevalent is like since my mother was also a working woman, my father also use to engage in kitchen chores and me and my siblings had to do kitchen chores equally. In that sense, it is very individualistic. Like any other Nepali family, we work together, we eat together and we may not be the wealthiest family, but we are the happiest family, I'd like to believe.

I: That's nice.

00:10:30

I: What would you say about traditional, heteronormative gender roles in your household while growing up?

A: What was it about?

I: Did you see those, or you didn't?

A: I think, maybe, the heteronormativity is deeply rooted. Sorry, what was the question again?

I: Like your father being the breadwinner and your mum being the caregiver, doing household chores. Like how traditional were gender roles while you were growing up? You mentioned that you also helped in the household.

A: Yea, my mum was more engaged in the kitchen and in household stuff, activities than my father since my father had other passive income kind of work. Maybe my mum always believed or always imposed that idea that everybody should work in the kitchen and that's how – I remember when my siblings used to go to school and I had summer vacation or something like that and I was the only one in the kitchen supporting mum, but since she had to do night duty and she had to come later in the noon. I had to prepare, because even though I didn't know how

to prepare food. She used to make me do that and I think, it all comes with my mother's idea that everybody should know, it is a life skill. And then again, at times I see like even my mum and dad had come from some travel, after travelling somewhere my mum was the first one going to the kitchen and doing all the household while my father is resting. But my mum actually makes my father do that and he does that.

I: Okay, so he understands, and he listens?

A: Yes, he does that.

I: And he didn't push your mother in this role?

A: Yea, yea, yea.

I: Okay, I see.

00:13:03

I: And besides your family who did you also spend time with when you were a child?

A: Beside my family?

I: Besides your close family members.

A: Yea, yea, yea, besides close family members I spent most of my time with my school friends. Most of the time, I used to be in school.

I: When did you start school?

A: I was three years old when I first joined school.

I: So, very young?

A: Yea, yea, yea. I used to hang out mostly with my friends and apart from that, friends from the neighborhood, like we used to hang out. And we used to play so many local games – kabaddi and gitti phoda.

I: What are those?

A: Okay, kabaddi is like you make a line and there are two teammates, and you get a turn like our participant from our team just goes and crosses the line that is created between the team and the participant, the other player has to go on the other side say kabaddi, kabaddi, kabaddi until that person does not take up full breath. And they will have to touch another teammate and if the other teammate is touched by even a tip of a finger or on the leg without being cut by

other teammates, then the players would just get killed and that's how you would get points. That's kabaddi.

I: That sounds fun.

A: Yea, that's actually very fun. And we used to have torn clothes because of that. Everybody used to push and while growing up another game that I used to do – I was never a sporty guy but I always used to go to the field with my brother. There used to be a local tournament, night cricket. There used to be night cricket where most of the men, boys from my neighborhood used to go and stay up until the morning.

I: Because it was cooler at night?

A: Yea, yea, it was. They used to play at night since it is very hot in summer. And that's how we spent most of the time together. Apart from that, mostly, I used to hang out with my siblings. Apart from that, I used to read. I was a very studious kid.

00:16:25

I: What kind of books did you read when you were small besides the मूना किताब?

A: It's called चुटकिला, चुट is books. Other child books called बल गीत, बल गीत means child songs. And mostly I used to do my course book, because I had this pressure of maintaining my academics, because I was always the first student, the topper. Either I was studying, or I would support my mom in the kitchen or just hang out with my siblings.

00:17:20

I: Who were your closest persons while growing up, during your childhood? Persons you were able to rely on, were trustworthy.

A: I think, I would like to believe that every person in my family shared the same dynamics but, in my childhood, I used to be closer with my brother. But then again, while growing up, I used to be closer with my sister than my brother and I don't know how that shift in dynamics occurred. Yea, at first, I used to be very close to my brother and after some years, my brother hit the puberty and then he mostly used to hang out with his friends from school and the neighborhood. He has different groups of friends. That's why. And I was more comfortable with my sister and her friends than with my brother and his friends.

I: Because? Do you know why?

A: Yea, I think – my name is Ajit, and they used to mispronounce my name saying ‘achjot’ that’s something about penetrating when my name is mispronounced.

I: Oh okay. So, it’s actually Ajit not ‘achjot’.

A: Yea, yea. And my brother’s friends used to mog me by mispronouncing my name. And apart from that I was more comfortable with my sister’s friends because they didn’t use to judge me for being one of a kind. I was a feminine kid not apparent, but somehow, I used to express my feminine side as well. And looking at my feminine side, my brother’s friends used to say: “तँ कस्तो जस्तो केटी” – you are like a girl and that used to hurt me. I was not very comfortable being called out like that way. So, that’s why I was very comfortable with my sister and her friends.

I: And what did you do when you were hanging out with your sister and her friends?

A: Oh wow. We used to play this game बरगुत्ति. बरगुत्ति is like the kid’s version of households where there’s a male and a female and they get married and they go for marriage and ritual things. They even have what women in Hinduism wear on their forehead.

I: Yea, here.

A: Yea, yea. We used to follow the traditions according to what we could see around us. We would just get along with everyone. We would just play बरगुत्ति and we used to do make up as well like there used to be powder, but I never preferred wearing eyeliner and I always preferred wearing powder. That was bronze powder that would cost only 2 rupees.

I: For your cheeks?

A: Yea, yea (laughs). And yea, that’s a thing we always used to do. And we also used to do अन्ताक्षरी. अन्ताक्षरी is like singing a song, there are supposed to be two teams while playing अन्ताक्षरी. If one of the teams ends a song by a word the other team has to sing a song with this word.

I: Yea, I know this game.

A: Yea, yea.

I: I don’t know how we call it, but I know what you mean.

A: Yea, do you also have that?

I: Yea, but I think I never played that because I'm not so much or I was not so much into singing as a child or as a younger kid, but friends of mine still play it, like on long car drives, they still play it.

A: (laughs). Yea, that's called अन्ताक्षरी in Nepali. We used to do that a lot.

I: Yea, that's fun.

00:22:58

I: So, can you take me through your school life?

A: School life.

I: From when you entered like the first grade or nursery or whatever until you graduated?

A: Sure.

I: Like how many schools did you go to, what did you like most, what did you not like, everything that comes to your mind.

A: Yea. I went for nursery to a private school. That's it since my brother and sister were also going to a private school, it would cost more. So, we transferred to another school, that was a public school. I started my primary classes in – my sister and I used to go to this primary school called बलमन्दिर school. बलमन्दिर is like temple for children. बल is kid, मन्दिर is temple. So, that's how I finished my primary school. I used to go to school with my sister. She used to be the first one to walk and reach home. Because since I was smaller than her, I could not walk faster.

I: How old is she?

A: She is just two years older than me. But when I was in – I don't know which grade – when she used to outwalk me, I used to just throw my bag, so that I could run faster. If she would not get my bag altogether, our mum would just scold my sister. It was her sole responsibility to bring all the stuff together and I had to run. I had to do that because I could not run faster than her. And that is how I finished my primary school. When I was in grade 5, she had to change her school in another where my brother used to study and that is called महान्द्री school. For a year, I had to go to primary school alone because my sister was transferred to another school because

she completed her primary study. I did my 6th to 10th grade in the school where also my brother and sister were. As a student up to high school I was very studious. In fact, I was a topper. If I came in second position, I used to cry. I used to cry in front of family for not getting good marks that would not make me a topper.

I: Very ambitious!

A: Yea, yea. I was actually very competitive. Maybe I also had that pressure to maintain my academics. I used to get a lot of prizes, like the government used to give me scholarships for being a brilliant student, be it a little money, but I used to get money from school once in a while. And I can remember, actually I was a topper in my district, Banke district, I was third topper from the public schools. I could not get to go to collect my prize, and my mum had to go. I remember my sister saying that she was crying because of the happiness that I brought. That was the first money, I think, that I gave her. It was 5000 Nepali rupees.

I: That was a lot back then, right?

A: Yea, it's like almost 13 years ago. And with the money, I got my mother a slipper, a fancy slipper, a traditional slipper and for my sister, I got her a t-shirt. And after +2, in my intermediate level, I took science as a major and since it was all in English medium, I had to learn faster, and I could not, and my study was not as good as it used to be in my schools. After being done with my intermediate level, I pursued my study in computer science. I later in life realized: "Okay, computer science is not something I want to pursue always." And being in college, being in university for my bachelors, everyday felt like a hustle.

00:29:16

A: I had explored my sexuality back then as well and I was being more vocal about all the queer issues within my university. But most of the so called friends, I don't consider them my friends, because they used to bully me.

I: May I ask what they did?

A: Yea. I also got bullied in school for having to wear specs. They used to call me out, saying: "Double ... (unintelligible) single power" and they also used to call me चारआँखा and चारआँखा means four eyed and that used to hurt me. For being a feminine kid, they used to say: "Maybe Ajit can give something, another guy wants". That's how they used to say, and I used to find it rather eccentric then hurtful because I did not know why ask the same thing with another guy. So, in my university most of my classmates from bachelors came from conservative districts

where there was no exposure of information. So, maybe that could also be one of the reasons that they were not aware of and that's why with the ... (unintelligible) they used to hurt me. And I didn't know until recent years that they used to bully me. I felt like, it was okay to say those things they used to say. Now I realize that was something called bully which I was not aware of. But that did used to hurt me and that was also one of the reasons why every day going to the college was a hustle. I did not have very good friends who could actually understand me and who would get my perspective and who I discuss my problems with. Even though I had that tendency of getting along with everyone, I got along with everyone in fact. We studied all together, but I was not comfortable with them.

00:32:01

I: Who were your closest persons during your teenage years?

A: Teenage years?

I: Still your sister kind of?

A: Yea, yea. My sister has always been my best friend, and I think, she was the only constant. First things first, I don't want to label anyone as my bestie or best friend, because I feel like, I am an extrovert, and I get along with everyone with kindness and everything. So, the only truest friend, I'd like to say, in my life, in my teenage years was my sister. Apart from that, I was more closer with female friends than male friends, because they are less judgemental and I used to feel comfortable expressing my feminine side. I used to talk about a lot of things like a lot of series. There is this bias, there is this prejudice in Nepali society that only women watch daily soaps, and this is not how I ever believed, because anyone can watch anything, right? So yea, my sister was the closest one.

00:33:31

I: When did you realize you being feminine is nothing bad anymore?

A: Okay. I think, at times, it just been a few years in fact, I always preferred putting nail paints. But I don't remember when I started realizing but I started impressing once I started working with the queer organization. I used to feel embarrassed when people call me out, but I have been more assertive of what is wrong and what is right. And I can take my stand. If somebody calls me out by calling me छक्क, हिजडा - हिजडा is like another term to call some feminine.

I: I know both, I know both छक्क and हिजडा.

A: I think, I can face that now with the assertive means and I think working with the queer organisation has helped me to impress the feminine side. Before that, I used to be so conscious of me not walking manly or so called normally. So, yea, now I still have that insecurity when somebody calls me out and that makes me aware of my activities and the way I walk or the way I speak. But I think over the years I've been more confident, and I strongly believe that I'm impressed my feminine side that also comes from my family who never questioned when I used to wear lipstick in my childhood. But my father used to say: "Don't wear lipstick, otherwise you may have short life." Maybe that was the direct ...

I: You have what?

A: Short life.

I: A short life. Okay, okay.

A: Yea, yea. When a man wears women's stuff, they're going to have short life. Maybe that was the sentence to stop someone wearing women's stuff, right? So, yea, I've been confident over the years.

I: That's nice to hear.

A: Yea. I'm glad.

I: I'm happy. I'm glad to know.

A: I'm glad that I can actually reply back when somebody assaults, or somebody calls someone out in the public like छक्क, हिजडा. Maybe it's the maturity that I have got. So, yea.

00:36:46

I: Can I ask you about how or when the process started of questioning or thinking more about your sexual orientation?

A: Okay, okay. I think, I have before coming out every time I say this story to people who I come out to. I think, I must have been 10 or 11 while playing in the playground, I was supposed to through a ball and I was supposed to run back, so that the ball thrown by someone could not touch me. Otherwise, I would be out. Like I was tossing the ball every time and the guy, he was two years older than me, he just ran to me and caught me and stopped throwing the ball at me. He just kissed, because I was a kid, and he also was a kid, and I felt nice. I did not know that I felt nice until some years back. And just after that night – I used to call him दाई (elder brother)

because he was from the same neighborhood – I saw that guy in my dream. And that just felt so nice, and I could not tell what was it and deep inside I knew, I liked him. Maybe it was just friendliness, or I was so comfortable hanging out, the way he used to look and that's when I first encountered my queer side. But I did not have the term to acknowledge what it was, right?

I: Yes.

A: So, with the years with the internet, I used to go to cyber and obviously, you know, as you are aware of it, most of the teenagers are very curious about sex and I used to google men kissing men (laughs heavily).

I: Okay.

A: The cyber cost 25 rupees for an hour and I used to browse all the stuff that I wanted to. I also used to type the word p-e-n-i-s in the browser, so that I could see (laughs). I don't know. Until then, I didn't know that I was gay, but it was different then normal, supposedly. I saw someone, when I was googling through men kissing men Nepal or something like that, those keywords, there used to pop up a person with a grey shirt and that was Sunil Babu Pant.

I: Oh, okay.

A: And I used to wonder who that person could be. And later I happened to know he was the founder of Blue Diamond Society that works as a queer organization.

I: Yes, yes.

A: So, yea, those incidents made me realize. I think, internet helped a lot.

00:40:38

A: One day I was browsing Facebook and some random person with an anonymous ID texted me, saying: "Are you off for a meet?" And I thought it was just a meet-up. And I said: "What is it?" and he said: "For fun." And for me, fun was having tea together.

I: Or a nice chat.

A: Yea, yea, yea. It was like that. And I went to meet that person anyway, but deep inside, since I was already 16 or 17. No, I was 14/15, I used to do my +2, intermediate level study. It was during Dashain (big Hindu festival in October), he just came in some चौक (street intersection) to take me on his bike. And I was palpitating so bad, and it was actually exciting, and I was

nervous, too. Like meeting someone random over the internet and just going to meet them and that was something I've never done previously.

I: Yea, it is exciting, of course.

A: Yea, exciting. Imagine, I was just 14 or 15.

I: Yea.

A: And he took me to his room. He had a good house, and he took me to his house, and we just were drinking water. We were just sitting on his sofa opposite to each other. And he just sat by my side, and he just held my hand. I could not resist because I was kind of liking it, but I was nervous. That's why I took my hands away and he said: "Are you nervous?" I said: "Ya, I don't know." Something like I just said that I was feeling uncomfortable. He took me to his room and that's when I had the first encounter. I actually liked it. I'm not lying, but it was something I – maybe as a teenager, obviously I was underage, but it was something that I liked.

I: How old was he?

A: He was 28. After that we started meeting often, twice or thrice. I don't know, I don't remember. But it was something that I loved. I actually loved it. And that's how I explored my gay side sexually. I started looking out for things informatively. I also used to get information about MSM, men having sex with men, about the possibility of getting infected and how you are supposed to use condoms, preventions. I think, internet taught me a lot and I think I started using condoms just because I got the information from the internet itself. Nobody taught me that I was supposed to wear a condom while having sex.

00:44:11

I: So, you did not have sex education at school? Or like just about how to make children?

A: Exactly! (laughs). It's called reproductive system, and the reproductive system used to be available in 8, 9 and 10th grade. I remember only boys used to look at the pictures and make fun of it because how vagina and penis were shown. I remember in one class, one of our teachers asked us to come to ... (unintelligible) after reading the chapter and we just came and that was just skipped. Obviously, I did not get any sexual education.

I: That's so sad.

A: Yea, it is.

I: Really sad.

A: I think, the only education that you can have sex education is in Nepal when you are, I think, already an adult, right?

I: Yea. I mean you already get curious when you are a teenager, right?

A: Exactly!

I: It should be brought up as soon as possible.

A: Exactly!

I: So that it is something normal and nothing shameful. That is my opinion.

A: Exactly! That is mine, too. I think, kids these days, given the internet access, they can do anything. So, information should be accessible to everyone, especially to those teenagers. And I wish, I could get sex education, better late than never. I don't know, I am okay.

00:46:07

I: One more question about the person if it's okay?

A: Yea.

I: Did you tell anyone about him during that time?

A: (Shakes his head).

I: No, no one?

A: No.

I: So, you kept it for yourself?

A: Yea, yea. I kept it for myself. I don't know, like it was for sex. I liked it, but later in life, after so many years it used to haunt me. I shouldn't have had sex that early, I shouldn't have started having sex that soon. I used to feel that. But sex is something that I actually enjoy.

I: Okay.

A: Now, I am an adult.

I: Yes.

A: I can make good decisions. I can have safe sex, and I encourage others to do that. Actually, I carry condoms with me so that if I see some sex workers since I have worked for a queer organization that used to advocate HIV prevention and treatment and I think, that also has helped me to broaden my sexual education and I think, that is why I also carry condoms and duplicands not only for myself, but also for others.

I: For others. That is good.

00:47:25

I: So, now we could delve more into the relation to your family members and when you went to college and did your bachelor's and talk about your coming out process and your work for the organizations or we kind of do a cut here and do this part later or tomorrow. How do you feel like?

A: I think, we can do one more question if you have one follow up question.

I: Okay, then I ask one more question about your teenage years. Did you see any kind of change in your relationship to your parents during your teenage years in comparison to your childhood?

A: I think, we have the same kind of dynamic, but while growing up, while I was in my teenage years, I think, I used to be an angry teenager. I used to shout, I used to be an angry teen. I think, that was the only dynamic, that was also from my side, but I did not have different treatments from my family members. But I think my sister, while growing up... (unintelligible), but I don't know, maybe also in a dinner table, when my mother and my sister were having dinner, and we had some kind of dispute like just casual sibling dispute. And she just called me out saying छक्क जस्तो – like a छक्क – and that hurt me, and I said crying: “यदि भगवानले मलाई यस्तो बनाउन रोज्नुभयो भने के गर्ने?” Like: “If god chose to make me like this, what would I do?”

I: Yea.

A: I think, she did not mean it, but rather she was just saying how her mind was being depleted regarding like binary system from the society. While growing up, this was the only thing regarding my sexuality that I was not aware of. That was the only thing that was hurtful from my family, but nothing more than that. I have always had the same consistent pattern of love. Maybe we used to struggle on a daily basis, but that did not change anything.

I: Was marriage a topic in your adolescence already?

A: Yea.

I: How did you react?

A: Yea, I don't know. I think, it is so common in Nepali society that once a boy is born and it's connected with getting in-laws like sister-in-law and daughter-in-law. And I think my mother used to urge us to think of saving money so that we would have a proper life, a proper family, so that we could look after our family financially. That was the only thing that used to utter from my mother's mouth, regarding marriage. Apart from that they did expect from my brother and I to bring a daughter-in-law and my sister to get a son-in-law. So that's all.

I: Okay, I see. Alright.

A: Are we done for now?

I: Do you want to say some more?

A: I don't have anything but if I remember, I just tell you.

I: Yes.

A: Thank you.

I: Thank you.

Protocol 3

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I3_Ajit_20240816_IA3

Interviewee: Ajit, male, age 26

Duration: 00:45:37

Location, Time: Kumari Inn, Kathmandu, 11.30 am, 16.08.2024

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Ajit's residence: Nepalgunj, Lumbini Province

Occupation: Computer and Social Scientist, Governance Mentor, Queer Ambassador, Poet

Scheduling and Arrival: On the morning of August 16th, Ajit and I exchanged messages on WhatsApp to confirm our plans for the day. We agreed to meet at 11.00 am at the Kumari Inn Hotel. I arrived on time, but Ajit needed a bit more time to get ready, so I waited in the reception area. During this time, I had tea with the hotel owner and took care of the formalities, including settling the hotel bill.

Pre-Interview Conversation: At around 11.15 am, Ajit came down from his room, and we greeted each other warmly with a hug. We sat at a table in the dining area, where we enjoyed a cup of tea, ate Nepali bananas, and engaged in light, casual conversation. This brief interaction helped to set a relaxed tone for the interview.

Interview Setting and Content: At approx. 11.30 am, we moved to the terrace to conduct the interview in a more private and uninterrupted environment. We sat side by side on two chairs with a view of the city. I began by summarizing what we had discussed in our previous meetings, and then Ajit began to speak in detail. He shared his experiences with openness towards me and clarity, showing a sense of comfort and familiarity in our conversation. Ajit provided an in-depth account of his various coming-out stories, as well as his reasons for choosing not to come out to certain people. His narrative was detailed and heartfelt, reflecting the trust that had developed between us.

Conclusion and Post-Interview Activities: The interview lasted for 45 minutes. Afterwards, we left the hotel and went to a nearby queer friendly café, where we had a small meal, iced coffee and played Jenga. We parted ways in the afternoon, with plans to meet again the following week for a casual dinner or another relaxed gathering.

Transcript 3

Date: 16.08.2024

Duration: 00:45:36

Interviewee: Ajit

Audio File: I3_Ajit_20240816_IA3

I: MS

A: Ajit

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I: So, I'll start.

A: Yeah, sure.

I: Is it okay? You can hold it again if you want to.

A: Yeah, I can. Thank you.

I: So, I would like to know about your years in college, like while doing your bachelors. How was your life back then and how is your life now? And just tell me everything that comes to your mind first.

A: Okay. While I was in the bachelors, I think I was very carefree. At the same time, I was emotional as I've always been an emotional person. But I was not more focused into studying because I realized during my sophomore year that computer science was not a thing. But I could not give up that because I was already into college and my fees were already given to the university by my parents and I didn't want to waste that. So, that's why I continued to study anyway. But I could not also have another option that what could be the subject that would interest me. So, that's all academic. And during my college, like I knew everyone, and I was comfortable with everyone, but I realized most of them were conservative regarding my sexuality, but I was not out and about. I was not openly gay, but they could sense my queerness by the way I used to talk, the way I used to walk, the way I used to say things, the way I used to advocate for queer rights. They sensed that. And one day I remember that something that I was really saddened by: We were studying because our exams were around the corner and there were five men including me. And the guy I was dating just called me. He used to live in Kathmandu, and I was in Nepalgunj. While preparing for the exam, I used to get calls from my boyfriend because he used to miss me. My ex-boyfriend, he used to call me once in a while, more often in a day. And one of the men, not friend, said: "Why is that guy calling you all over again? He must be doing you in a way." Like he said: "He probably fucks you a lot." I couldn't say anything to be more assertive of my sexuality because I was not out and I could not embrace my sexuality back then.

So, I anyway passed out the exam, like I cleared the exams with average marks. And during my bachelors I thought I would never get a job. I would never earn money. That was it during my bachelors.

00:04:07

A: I was not very comfortable with my classmates. But there was this junior who was actually very nice to me, and I decided to come out to him through text and he said that he was very proud of me for doing so. And I'm still in touch with him and I kind of flirt with him, he's straight. But yeah, he was the only one that I would want to think of when it comes to my bachelors.

I: And why did you decide to come out to him? What was the reason behind?

A: Because maybe he was very comfortable to me. For me, I was very comfortable with him. Because he was someone that I admired appearance-wise and intellect-wise. Intellectually, he was very fine, and we used to hang out once in a while in the college. I decided to come out because I wanted to feel that validation from someone from the college. Probably I wanted my identity to be validated by someone from the college, because I was discriminated. I don't know like it feels sad, like while studying, somebody used to touch me, and they wanted to fuck me. Maybe (stuttering) I did feel okay, but I was a bit uncomfortable because it was not romantic, and they used to pretend like they were not queer. They were not queer but that's why I was not very comfortable with those guys. But with the junior, I'm glad that I met him during my college.

I: Do you remember the words you used for your coming out in front of him?

A: Ah, yeah, obviously! Yes, yes. I told him – his name is Saroj – and I texted him. It was during Dashain vacation and we were not going to the college those days since it was vacation. And one day, he was asking like, how my Dashain was and what else did I do. I asked him the same and it was okay. I kind of felt for him, something real platonic or romantic. I don't know what it was but when I said: “Saroj, I want to tell you something.” And he said: “Okay go, fine.” He is very flamboyant; he is a very chill person I have ever known. And I said, I told him: “I am not a regular guy.” And he said: “I think I'm okay with that.” He said like: “It's fine, it doesn't matter to me as long as you are fine.” I also said: “I kind of have a crush on you.” He is the only person that I admired in my college. He replied that he felt lucky to be told that thing like that I was into him.

He also said: “Only if I was born gay, I would have definitely dated you as well or if you were a girl, I would have dated you too.”

I: Yeah.

A: And it was very validating. After that in college, we didn't talk about it because it didn't matter. My sexuality did not occur between us, but it was like nothing. Yeah.

Now you asked how I found myself during this time, during present time. I think I'm very confident about my sexuality and I have embraced my feminine side – embraced my feminine side confidently rather. I used to feel embarrassed if I wore nail paints and mehendi. But I don't feel shy or embarrassed, if I do now, it's fine. I thought I would never earn, but I'm earning enough. And I can pursue my education. I have skipped computer science, because I have pursued social science now. I'm more of a liberal arts person and I want to do my master's in liberal arts or social science. So yeah, I'm very much confident. And I don't see the need of coming out every time I talk to – I just think it used to be very dramatic when I wanted to come out from my side. Dramatic in a way that I had to say it and convince myself that it's like somebody who I'm coming out to will be fine with that. But these days, I randomly tell them that I'm into boys and not into girls and I don't care about their reaction. Even though they are very important to me. If they are actually very important to me. I try to convince, or I try to know their mind before coming out. So, that the dynamic between us does not get ruined.

00:11:18

I: Did you come out in front of your family?

A: Did I come out to?

I: In front of your family.

A: Actually, I have two siblings, one elder brother and one elder sister. My parents don't know about me, but I have come out to my sister and brother, and they are very supportive. My brother-in-law and my sister-in-law are also very supportive. Actually, they want me to get married to a guy if I want to.

I: That's nice to hear!

A: If they see some guys in the street or somewhere and they think of if the guy is fit for me, if the guy is queer. So, yeah, I'm very much accepted by my siblings and supported not only accepted. But I don't dare to come out to my parents any soon. I know the topic of marriage will be coming, because it has already started coming since both of my other siblings have got married and they have their own family. And my mother especially wants me to get married now, but she is not urging me to get married. But she asks me to think of getting married soon.

I: Why did you decide not to tell your parents?

A: Okay.

I: Yet.

A: Yet. I think I have some instances. My parents know that I work for a queer organization. The program coordinator of the program is transgender, and she is famous in Nepalgunj. Most of the people from my parents' generation know her and they know what kind of woman she is, they call her हिजडा, but they accept her. After knowing, she was fine. She did not have any problem with me working in a queer organization. But I don't know, lately, my mother has been acting different regarding my feminine expression, just like wearing hairpins.

She keeps asking me: “केटाले किन लगागेको मेहेन्दी? केटाले किन लगागेको नेल पॉलिश?” She keeps asking me: “Being a guy, why are you wearing hairpins?” And I say, I make excuses since I have the habit of biting nails and that's why I put the nail paints. Sometimes I just become assertive and just say: “No, I just like it.”

Due to such instances, I am not choosing to come out or maybe I don't want to hurt them. Maybe she has a lot of expectations from me. They are obviously expecting me to get married to a girl and bring a daughter-in-law for them and in most cases, I say, I am not going to get married at all, not even with a girl, let alone a guy.

I: So, this is kind of your way of expressing that...

A: I am queer?

I: ... that you are you and that you are not following the expectations.

A: Yeah.

I: So, it's not the classic way of coming out of the closet. It's your way to frame yourself.

A: Yeah.

I: And what sexuality you have? Is it? Can it be named like that?

A: I think, I am just dosing my mom's expectations. I know, there will be coming those days where they will be forcing me to get married. I may even have to tell them that I am queer and that I am only interested into men.

I: How do you feel about that thought?

A: I don't know. My mom is going to be... I can see looking at the temperament my mom generally has. She wants to – she will be angry. She will be disheartened.

I: But how do you feel? Are you scared?

A: Yeah, yeah, I feel terrible because I may think – I know I have to hurt her just by being myself, but since she does not understand everything that I know that will hurt me, looking at her expectations getting shattered. I think she has done a lot for me and my siblings, and my father has also done a lot. Maybe that will make me sad, like devastated even. If I have to come across such scenario, I'll have to be so strong. And my siblings have reassured me that if I ever have to come out to our parents, they are always going to be back.

I: So, they will always have your back?

A: Yeah.

I: That's good to hear.

A: Yeah, yeah.

I: And do you have the same reasons not to come out in front of your father? Than you have with your mom?

A: I think... My father is just indifferent about our preferences. He just lets us free. He doesn't force us anything. And my mom kind of wants to comply by the normality of the society. So, that would be one of the reasons, but then again, my father also has expectations that he would see me getting married with a woman.

I: Can you... This way. The speaker is there.

A: Oh, okay, yeah! I forgot (laughs).

I: No problem. And do you feel like if you are moving to another place, for example to Kathmandu or if you are going abroad for achieving your master, you have more freedom?

A: I think, I have all the freedom to make like I have all the freedom that I want now. I don't feel like I'm obliged, or I'm burdened by something. I'm living my own life, exploring my sexual

side, my platonic side, but maybe I have not given a thought of settling abroad just because of my sexuality.

I: But also to Kathmandu, to kind of express yourself in a more open way?

A: I think I'm just fine wherever I am in Nepalgunj, even though I'm in Kathmandu, I'm the same person. I don't have any problem expressing myself in Nepalgunj. I only have not come out to my parents, but I don't care about being myself in front of others, because I don't care what they think of me. Another thing that I don't want to settle abroad is how deeply rooted my feelings are with my family. We have always been so intact within. It's very hard for me to let go of those feelings of not being home, not feeling like home anywhere. I don't think sexuality is a problem for me to navigate these days, but I can see my sexuality being a problem in the future with my parents, but I don't care about others. Even though my extended family knows about me, I don't care as long as my parents don't get affected by that.

I: I see.

00:21:06

A: I want to – may I tell a story about how I came out to my sister?

I: I was about to ask. Yes, please.

A: It was 2017. I was 20 years old. My boyfriend then, now my ex-boyfriend came to Nepalgunj. He's from Kathmandu. He came to Nepalgunj. Since I'm very close to my sister. Most of my friends are her friends. Most of her friends are my friends. It didn't take long for my sister to get along with my boyfriend. He was sitting, but I think she knew about all the queers, but she was not aware of my sexuality. One day, when we were making खाजा, snacks.

I: Yes, yes खाजा.

A: Yeah, snacks on a Saturday, she asked, why does she find our bonding very eccentric? About me and my boyfriend's bonding. It made me aghast. It had my guard off.

What was she going to ask? I got astonished, the way she asked. Upon that, I asked: "What difference do you see with him apart from other friends that I have?" She said: "How can someone who has just been known for a month travel to see you from Kathmandu taking this long road?" And he said, he's just a friend (laughs). And she said: "Are you guys dating?" And

I felt so emotional. I couldn't say anything. I said. I cried. I cried back then. If I have to rephrase what I said. Then, I've always been a different guy. I've never been a regular guy. I think I love him. I told her everything, showing him. He also said: "We love each other." And she cried.

I: Because she was so happy?

A: Yeah, she got emotional. She cried. It was a different feeling. We didn't talk about it. We never talked about it. When she cried, I also cried. And she said: "It's fine, I don't care. As long as you are safe." Until my boyfriend was in Nepalgunj, she felt different. She started acting weird. I told her: "What is happening to her? What was happening to her?" And she said: "I feel like my brother is being taken away." And it was not because of the sexuality, she told me that, that I was going away from her.

I: Because you were in a relationship?

A: Yeah, and I was, because she probably had felt that I was pretending all along like throughout my life and now. I have put my marks off. And she had probably felt different about that and I could also understand that since she did not also have the exposure to the world, about the LGBT world. And I told her, but she was never unkind to me. She was never cruel to me. She spoke about her emotions and yeah, that is how I came out to my sister.

00:26:16

A: Apart from that, after that, after two days my brother called me, and he did not used to live in Nepalgunj. Since my brother is Christian.

I: Ah, okay.

A: He has converted his religion into Christian. That was two years ago – I came out to, two years before I came out to my sister. He said: "Are you fine?" He asked, if I was fine and it was early in the morning, and I said: "I am very fine." Kavitha is my sister's name. And he said: "Kavitha told me." Something like this. "About you." And I said "Yeah, like, what do you feel about it?" I asked him: "What do you feel about it?"

I: So, your sister outed you in front of your brother?

A: Yeah. She did not bitch about it, I am sure. Maybe, she was struggling with the emotion after knowing my sexuality, right? So, that is why she sought help from my brother and when I asked

him, how he felt about it and he said: “I do not care as long as you are safe, as long as you are studying well.” And I cried. But he said: “The Bible says different things.” And I do not know how come I asked that question, but I said: “Does bible tell you to be inhuman to others?” And he said: “No, but it is restricted. It’s not good, but you should not care about that since you are not Christian.” That is what he said. After that in the recent years, we have talked about how they used to make fun of my feminine side. And then because, they were also kids and we make fun of it now like I also laugh at what they said and what I replied. Like, for instance, when I told during the kitchen dinner to my sister like it’s funny. It is funny when we think of those days where they used to make fun of me. They were also kids. So, yeah, we laugh it off these days. After both of them get married, my sister and my brother.

I: How old is your brother?

A: My brother is five years older than me. He told me, like obviously if somebody knows something their partners are 100% going to know that too. And they talked about it.

00:29:39

A: And I have made a video during lockdown. My brother and sister were telling my mother about LGBT community, showing the video, showing one of the interviews of a homosexual couple and she was okay back then and she was like: “Okay it's fine like as long as your kid is not gay.”

I: Okay, okay so this was her reaction.

A: Yeah.

I: For other people, it's fine, but for the own family.

A: Yeah, yeah. That makes me stop. That stops me from thinking of coming out to my mother specifically.

I: I see.

00:30:25

A: So, yeah like apart from everything, I’m good with my siblings. I think maybe I’m confident because of the dynamic that I have with my siblings. With my sister and my brother, I’m very comfortable, we can talk. And I think the sex positive side comes also from my siblings, we do

talk of about sex, we do talk about sex like issues on sex, sex education, HIV and sex work. So, I think, we are very progressive.

00:31:14

I: Okay. May I ask...

A: Yeah.

I: How did your siblings get married? Was it a love marriage or was it arranged?

A: Both of them got love marriage.

I: Okay.

A: Yeah.

I: And what is their profession?

A: Okay, both of them are from medical field. My sister is a nurse.

I: Okay.

A: And my brother is a public health person.

I: Okay.

A: So, yeah. And my parents also worked in hospital.

I: Okay.

A: But they're not well educated.

I: Okay.

A: They just got some work for the (unintelligible) level and so, that was it.

00:32:09

I: So, why do you think your siblings are so open about those topics?

A: Maybe, we have progressive mindset, and we are well educated. And they have worked in medicine and my brother also worked for the HIV prevention and treatment program. They are

open, because we talk about a lot of things, like a lot of taboo subjects. If you don't know, girls in Brahmin Nepali family, if a girl is menstruating, they are not supposed to go inside the kitchen and they are not supposed to be touched. I think, we have always adopted that practice in our household, but recently it has been broken and we didn't practice that anymore. The only problem is since my father is very religious and he only has a problem if a girl touched or went into the kitchen while menstruating, but my sister and my mother have decided not to tell while they are menstruating.

(...)

00:35:50

A: Another thing is – may I tell you another story?

I: Yes, please.

A: Not it was not me but about my friend. He is Harvard graduated person.

I: Okay, wow.

A: And he comes from Jhapa. Jhapa is like in the eastern side.

I: East, yes.

A: Yeah, and he's in his early 30s now and he just returned back to Nepal after a year. The incident occurred in June and when he was home, since he is already in his early 30s, he has been forced to get married by his parents. After going to the states and seeing how liberal queer people can be, and how out and about they can be in the US, he told me: “Every day I feel so good about my sexuality, when I’m in the streets and when I’m all rainbow and butterfly. While I’m here, I know all these colors are going to fade out once I am home.” He said. And since he was being forced to get married, he thought of coming out. And he came out in June in the pride month. His father was struck, his mother did not move from her chair even after half an hour. She was shocked.

I: Yes.

A: And interestingly, his father told him: “We don't care whatever you do. You should just go and live abroad, get married with a foreign girl and have a baby.”

I: So, they still want him to get married with a woman?

A: Yeah, and that's what they said back then. They were asking him to get married with a foreign woman and they asked him to have a baby. And you can return back to Nepal with the baby after years and we can tell the society then that they have been divorced and all, he has a child.

I: So, it's like most important for them...

A: Exactly!

I: ...bringing a child into a family, a next generation.

A: No, maybe and then again on the other side is they want the society to see that everything is normal in their home. Even though his son has to pretend that he's straight and he got married with a girl and he had babies. And he came out and after that there has no conversation occurred between them and they're fine. They don't force him to get married since he's going to Switzerland for his new project, that he's in. After that he said like – if i can rephrase – he said he said: “मलाई केटा मान्छे मन पर्छ, मलाई केटी मान्छे मन पर्दैन.” He said: “I love men not women. I want to have sex with men and not women.” That was a bit shocking for them and they're fine with it now.

I: Okay.

A: There's no conversation, no follow-up conversation has been made. And when I was talking about it with my other friends and like he's a topper from the university he's a Harvard graduated and he's a lawyer. His parents have a lot to brag about him, right?

I: Yes, they can be very proud.

A: Yeah, but they are still forcing him to get married just to comply by the normative.

I: Yeah, by the norms of the society.

A: Yeah, isn't that – I don't know.

I: I get goosebumps. And he still can have a child.

A: Exactly!

I: ...without having sex with a woman, without getting married to a woman, he can still have a child if they want. It might not look like him then.

A: Yeah, yeah, he can have, if he has strong genes.

00:41:16

I: Yes, like in some European countries it's allowed to go to – I don't know how you name this, but pay a woman to become pregnant and carry out your child.

A: Surrogacy.

I: Surrogacy, yes. This is possible and it can be with your sperm.

A: Yeah.

I: So, there are options.

A: Yeah.

I: Because I don't know like you can be gay and want children without having a woman in your life. It's just a need like it can be a basic need and it doesn't matter which sexuality you have to feel that.

A: It is not legalized surrogacy and that idea, it is not legalized in Nepal, but my भाउजू, my brother-in-law, my sister's husband has done his embryology and he wants to practice idea of surrogacy in Nepal. And he says: "If you get married with a guy, I think, I will be the one to make your baby." Make my baby. So, yeah, yeah.

I: Yes, yes. I mean, it's forbidden in many countries, in Germany it's also forbidden. Because there were cases of very desperate women who got pregnant each year and it's like just destroying their bodies and they got too little money. So, if it's like well regulated, I find it okay.

A: Yeah, yeah, it has to be under monitoring.

I: Yes, yes.

00:42:57

I: Isn't there this famous movie? This Bollywood movie?

A: Yeah, yeah.

I: With this beautiful Mina something? Mina. With this beautiful dancing dancer and she is becoming a...

A: Yeah, I have you watched that, too! (Laughs). I think, we should do some movie day soon within some days later.

I: Like Bollywood movie night!

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I: I actually watched a couple of Bollywood movies.

A: Yeah, Mimi or something like that.

I: Mimi, Mina something, yeah. And then it's like the taxi driver who's the father.

A: Yeah! It's Mimi, it's Mimi.

I: And he's already married and he's much older than her, but he's very nice, oh god. It's a funny movie.

A: (Laughs). There are lots of queer movies in Bollywood, actually genuinely beautiful and impactful.

I: Yeah, like the last one, I watched, was, I think, we talked about it, Badhaai Do. Was it Badhaai Do?

A: Badhaai Do, yeah.

I: Where the police officer and the sport teacher got married.

A: Oh wow, you have watched that?

I: Yeah, the movie which I didn't like was Dostana.

A: Dostana yeah, it is very problematic.

I: I mean, it's like cartoon-ish and stereotype-ish,

A: Yeah, I think another movie, actually impactful movie – I love that movie, it's based on true events – it's called Aligarh.

I: Aligarh?

A: Yeah.

I: Never watched it.

A: I would love you if you watched it like some other day. You can just put that in your watch list.

I: Yes, you can just type it down on WhatsApp maybe for me because I have difficulties to type Hindi words.

A: Okay, I'll send you everything, don't worry.

I: Okay and I watched Margarita with a Straw, if you have watched this one?

A: Yes.

I: So, many, many different topics combined, and I've watched a couple of movies, but something with, it has a really long name,

A: There is a queer movie in Nepal as well.

I: Yeah, I've only watched नीलो फूल so far.

A: Blue flower, by Sunil Babu Pant.

I: Yes, but it was like a short movie and there are a couple of movies I've heard.

A: There is a famous movie.

I: Can I stop?

A: Yeah.

I: I think, it's enough.

Participant Anil

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I9_Anil_20240830_IA1

Interviewee: Anil, male, age 39

Duration: 01:01:34

Location, Time: Kyampa Social Hub, 30.08.2024 at 2.30 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Anil's residence: Sanepa, Lalitpur, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Social Worker, Freelancer

Background and Initial Contact: I first became aware of Anil in April/May this year when I read an article in a Nepali newspaper. The article was written from the perspective of his father, who discussed his son's homosexuality, his son's marriage to a man, and how he felt about it. It was a positive article. Then, a few weeks ago, I came across another article that detailed the marriage and legal recognition of Anil and his German husband by the Supreme Court of Nepal. They pursued legal recognition in 2022/23 and are now acknowledged as the second married half-Nepali, half-international same-sex couple in Nepal.

My good friend Ben, who is friends with Anil, shared his contact information with me via WhatsApp in early August. I reached out to Anil in mid-August, briefly introducing myself and my research project. He responded positively, expressing his willingness to speak with me. We coincidentally met at a poetry event shortly thereafter, which was a good opportunity to get to know each other briefly and form a first impression before conducting a formal interview.

Meeting Details: We scheduled the interview for August 30th, 2024, at 2.30 pm at Kyampa Social Hub in Sanepa. I arrived early at 1.00 pm to work on my laptop, and Anil also arrived early at 2.15 pm. We greeted each other warmly with a handshake and sat across from each other in a covered area of the venue, which featured large windows on two sides and plenty of day light. We ordered juice and coffee and spent the first 20 minutes casually chatting. We talked about the event where we had met, how our week was so far, work and other small talk topics.

Interview: At around 2.40 pm, we began the formal interview. Anil was very open and encouraged me to ask him anything. The interview lasted approximately one hour, during which

he provided detailed and thorough answers to all my questions. The conversation was insightful, and his openness allowed for an in-depth discussion of his experiences.

After the Interview: After the interview, Anil mentioned that I could reach out to him anytime with follow-up questions once I had analysed my data. He had to leave shortly after the interview ended, because he had another appointment. He expressed that he would be happy to meet again sometimes. We shook hands again and parted ways.

Conclusion: The meeting was highly successful, with Anil displaying a great deal of trust in me. The atmosphere between us was relaxed and comfortable, making it an effective and productive interview.

Transcript 1

Date: 30.08.2024

Duration: 01:01:34

Interviewee: Anil

Audio File: I9_Anil_20240830_IA1

I: MS

A: Anil

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I: I put it here in the middle.

A: Sure, try to speak loudly.

I: Yeah, but it's normally, it's very good.

A: Okay.

I: Alright, so could you introduce yourself first? What you do, what your name is, where you live.

A: Sure.

I: Yes, whatever you want to say.

A: Sure. My name is Anil. I am 40 years old. I'm sorry, I'm 39 years old. I forget, I'll be 40 soon (laughs). Well, I have been working in the development field for almost 15 years now. I am a freelancer at the moment. Yeah, and I live in Kathmandu, and I am happily married to a man.

I: So, you're living, the two of you in one apartment?

A: Yes, the two of us, yes.

00:01:01

I: So, I start now with your childhood and adolescence. Could you take me through your childhood and teenage years?

A: Sure.

I: Where and how did you grow up? And what was your surrounding like?

A: Sure. So, I went to a boarding school, all boys boarding school. So, my childhood was very much boarding school, not too far from Kathmandu. Back then, pretty far because there was no infrastructure. It's a place called Godawari. Maybe you know Godawari. Anyway, it's in the southern part of the valley, let's say.

I: Ah, Godawari.

A: Yes, Godawari, yes.

I: Where the botanical garden is?

A: Where the botanical garden is. So, I spent my childhood there. So, just school, just men, boys, you know, pretty much sports, games, studying, playtime, out in the nature. Yeah, like, I think that's what I can tell you pretty much from my childhood. Yeah, if that makes sense.

I: Do you remember what you liked doing when you were a child?

A: Yes.

I: Like, what your hobbies were?

A: Yes.

I: What your favourite games were?

A: Yes. I really enjoyed, I don't know how to say this or explain this, but I really enjoyed playing outdoors. So, for example, being creative and, I don't know, making a river with, like, sand and water and making a bridge with, like, wood and, you know, wooden sticks, arts and crafts. I've

always enjoyed nature. So, I always liked nature. I love to dance and to sing. Yeah, pretty much these things. Painting, yeah.

00:03:12

I: And who lived at your home? Like, do you have siblings?

A: Yes.

I: Or did you live in a joint family or a nuclear family?

A: I lived in a nuclear family, so it was my parents, my sister and me. The four of us.

I: Okay.

A: Yeah, it's a small family.

I: Okay.

A: Yeah.

I: And you are from the valley?

A: Well, that's a difficult question to answer for many South Asians, I would say, because I grew up in the valley. I grew up in Kathmandu. My father is from the eastern district of Khotang, which is very close to Solukhumbu, the Everest region. My mother is from Biratnagar in the Terai, yeah. So, I was born in Biratnagar, but I grew up here. So, I tell people that I am from Kathmandu. Yeah, if that makes sense.

I: Yes.

A: Yeah.

00:04:14

I: And what were your parents' occupation when you were a child?

A: So, my dad was a government officer. He worked for the government. And my mom was a housewife.

I: Okay. And did this change? Like, did your mom start working as well at some point?

A: No, she did not. As far as I know, I think, let's say, she gave up her career to be with her children because she is highly educated, but she just decided to be home and spend time with the kids because my father was a very busy man.

I: Okay.

A: If that makes sense.

I: And how often did you go home?

A: From boarding school, you mean?

I: Yeah.

A: Not very often, actually. I would say, maybe twice a year or three times a year.

I: Like during...

A: Yeah, during Dashain.

I: Dashain Tihar.

A: Tihar. And we had winter holidays, which was long. And maybe for like a week or two in summer, yeah.

00:05:21

I: And were you close to your family, even though you were not around them?

A: I think I was. I mean, as a child, it's very difficult to, I don't know, to determine closeness, I guess. But yes, I was close. I would say I was closer to my mom than my father. But yeah, I was close, yeah.

I: And who was your, like the person you relied on most during your childhood? Like the person you felt most comfortable around?

A: I would say my mother.

I: Your mother.

A: Definitely my mother and maybe my sister to an extent, but my mother more.

I: Is your sister older or younger?

A: She's older.

I: She's older, okay.

00:06:16

I: Did you have friends at boarding school? Like close friends?

A: Yes, I did. I had. I was a very friendly kid. I got along with everyone, but I had a couple of close friends, yeah.

I: And like what did you do in your free time with the friends?

A: I think we would play most of the time. We were like playing random games like hide and seek, because we were in nature. So, we were always running around. If not that, then we were playing board games, yeah.

00:06:57

I: Is the boarding school time a good memory for you? Or how do you feel about it?

A: I would say yes. So, I went to boarding school from grade 1 until grade 6. Okay?

I: Okay.

A: And then there was a break and then I went to a regular school. But again, I went to boarding school for high school, so after I finished SLC. After that I went to boarding school again for two years in India. So, if you talk about my childhood boarding school in Godawari. Yes, I had a very good time. I think it was definitely one of the best moments of my life, because I learned so much in that school. Yeah, okay, being far away from home was not always easy as a child, but you get used to it, I guess. Yes, a lot of fond memories. The same from boarding school in India, like the two years of high school. But the regular school, I don't think... I would say it's 50-50.

I: Why did you switch schools?

A: No, I did not switch schools. So, the school was set up in such a way that you would study from the 1st grade to the 6th grade in Godawari. And after that in Jawalakhel.

I: It was the same school?

A: Yes, it was the same school. But the set up was as such.

I: Did your friends also go there?

A: Friends you mean like...

I: Like the friends from the boarding school? Did they also go there?

A: Most of them.

00:08:45

I: How old were you when you switched schools? In 6th grade? 12?

A: After 6th grade I was 12.

I: 12?

A: Yes, 12.

I: And then you spent more time with your family, right?

A: Yes.

I: Did anything change?

A: Yes.

I: About your dynamics?

A: I would say so. Because I was living with my parents, let's say. In some ways I think... There were certain house rules to follow in a way, right? Because... And also, we lived in a city. So, there was not enough outdoor space, let's say, to play or to do things, yeah. That was one aspect. And the other aspect was... To delve into the topic of... I always knew I liked men. It was very clear to me ever since I was young. Maybe I did not know the term gay or homosexual or queer. But I always knew I liked men. So, once I switched schools, let's say, my life was very different. I don't know. I felt this very uber masculine environment, because we were all teenagers. As teens it's very common that guys tease you or bully you, let's say. So yeah, I started realizing that I'm different and if you're different, you have to either stand up for yourself. You have to,

in a way, give in and integrate. Or you have to be so isolated that the world around you doesn't bother, yeah. So, you're caught up in these three different scenarios constantly. So... Was I bullied? And please tell me where I should not be very heavy or whatever helps your research, you can be honest.

I: My method is that I don't have any hypothesis, and I do it after my data collection.

A: Okay.

I: So, everything can be valuable.

A: So, I was caught up in these three scenarios constantly. I don't think I was very effeminate, let's say. So, in that sense, I did not fully meet the derogatory term criteria. I don't know if you know the terms like tough guys or not. So, I did not necessarily 100% fit in that category. However, I was polite, I was soft-spoken, I was calm. So, somewhere, my attributes were always compared to the feminine side. And in a very toxic masculine environment, that is often considered inferior, let's say. Because you're different from the men. So, I would say I did not really have a lot of close friends after I switched schools. I felt lonely, very much. I kept to myself. I had some friends. But I felt like I could never really be 100% with them. I always had to pretend to be someone else or to be something else. So, grade 7, grade 8, grade 9, grade 10. The 3-4 years was not the most memorable. Now that I think of it, that explains so many reasons why I did not do very well in school, because I just never felt 100% comfortable. Yeah, and again in high school, grade 11 and 12, let's say. The term that's used here. It was different. I was in the mountains in India.

I: Okay.

A: So, it was nice. I was away from home. But also there, I felt like I never fit in, because I was from a different culture. Although I went to, let's say, a fancy school. I just always felt like an outsider. I think I had good friends. I'm not in touch with them anymore, but when I was there for 2 years, I made some good friends. And definitely did not feel so lonely or horrible. And also, I think my gayness, let's say, did not bother me so much or it never bothered me in the first place. Yeah, so mixed feelings.

I: So, did you feel unnormal because of your sexuality in school?

A: No, I never felt unnormal.

00:14:16

A: And also, sorry, I forgot to tell you. But I told my mom's best friend's daughter, who I was close with. I was in the 7th grade, I remember. And I told her, I think, Smriti, her name is Smriti. I said: "Smriti, I think I might be gay, or I like men." And she told me: "It's absolutely normal, you know?" Like there's nothing wrong with me. So, I think that idea was imprinted on my brain from very little. Of course, around that time, MTV was very popular, for example. And there were some celebrities from certain boy bands or even George Michael, let's say. And their sexuality in one way or the other was discussed, because I remember George Michael was often caught by the police for misconduct in public restrooms. Or, I don't know, different things like that. So, no, I never thought it was abnormal. Of course, because you are different, you tend to think like, is this right or is this wrong? But I never rejected myself.

I: Okay.

00:15:32

I: Do you remember when you learned about the term homosexual or gay? And then you knew like, ah, that's me? Was there a moment?

A: Yeah, let's say more or less. So, after I finished SLC, I started exploring, you know. So, I actually started meeting men. I was just 16 years old. But there was a way to... There were like chat rooms, you know. So, you come up with a very obvious nickname. So, you know, if the other person is also from the queer community, they would recognize it and they would message you, right? So, that's how, because we did not have, I don't know, cell phones or, I don't know, instant messaging or whatever back then. So, that's how we started exploring. So, I met... Do you want to turn it on? Maybe you're hot. So, after I started meeting guys, I felt more and more comfortable. And I was like, okay, I'm not the only one. There are many guys like me and it's absolutely normal.

I: But this was in India?

A: This was in Nepal.

I: In Nepal, okay.

A: So, this was in Nepal. In India, I wouldn't say...

I: Because I was just thinking about the laws back then and everything was very strict in India.

A: It was, no. So, in India, I never explored or met anyone. And also, I went to a boarding school. So, basically, whenever I had holidays, I would fly to Nepal. You know, it's not like I spent time in a big city. I never did that in India. So, this was in Nepal. So, whenever I came for the holidays, I met guys. So, this was in Nepal.

I: Okay.

00:17:21

I: And do you remember the moment when you first felt attracted to someone? Like in a physical, romantic way?

A: Yeah, I would say (laughs). I think since very young. But I remember, I think it was in 7th grade. I was really – I had a crush, let's say, on a guy. Yeah, that was the first time I remember that I felt something very strongly for someone.

I: Did you do anything?

A: No.

I: No? Okay.

A: He was straight as a ruler. Of course, you wouldn't talk about these things back then.

I: But did you tell Smriti, for example? Or any other?

A: No, I did not. Because also Smriti was here for a brief time. So, she had left already. I don't think I told – No, I didn't tell anyone.

I: Okay.

A: I don't remember telling anyone.

I: Okay.

A: Yeah, I don't think so.

I: Okay.

00:18:25

I: Do you remember the first time telling someone that you feel attracted to someone? Or that you're meeting a man or a boy?

A: Like telling them directly that I like you?

I: No, like telling your friends and surrounding.

A: I think... Not explicitly, so after I finished high school, I went to the US to study. I was in New York. And I think that's where I came out, let's say, if that's the right term. Not that I announced to people that I'm gay, but I was very honest. And, you know, I lived my life openly. And I think it was never a big deal, if that makes sense.

I: Yes.

A: Yeah? So, I don't know how to say this, but I think in some ways I never experienced this kind of euphoria like you tell someone and... Because I lived my life honestly after I was in the US. And people figured it out. It was a normal thing. Yeah.

00:19:40

I: And... Did you feel like you were more free in the US?

A: Yes, definitely. I felt very free because I could be myself. I could be myself and also I studied social work, yeah? And generally social workers are pretty open-minded people. So, in most scenarios, I never had to hide my identity. So, definitely, I felt very free.

I: And... Why was it not like that in Nepal, before you left?

A: Well, it's mainly because the idea was not very familiar to people, let's say. Yes, there were some people who knew about it, but it was not an open topic like it is today. Or has been in the last 7-8 years, yeah? And I think when something is not talked about openly, you don't feel comfortable revealing certain things about yourself. I don't know if that makes sense, yeah? It's something like racism, you know? Like the way racism is addressed and talked about or white privilege, for example. It did not exist so much a few years ago, yeah? Like, of course, there are two different ideas that I'm comparing, but I think it's something similar. Yeah, and maybe because in the US, it was more out there and it was legal, let's say. So, because when the legality factor is there, you already feel safe. Okay, I'm not being prosecuted.

00:21:28

I: At what time did you go to the US? Like, what year range?

A: I think this was 2004.

I: Okay, so I have something in mind about the situation here and at other places.

A: Yeah.

I: How long did you stay in the US and what would you say about your time there?

A: Okay, so I was there for a total of 8 or 9 years, something like that, yeah? But I also came back in between. So, I was there for 5 years in the beginning and then I was there for 2 or 3 years. I forget. Mixed, again. I think a lot of credit goes to the US for what I am today, definitely. How I accepted myself, let's say, that's a horrible term – but how I embraced myself for what I am. For certain individual values I've instilled. Self-value, let's say. For that I'm grateful and I had a very good time. But also, I think what I realized after living in the US for so long is the western world is not for me. Yeah, I like it definitely, I'm not denying that. But the idea we have, at least in this part of the world, for people who lack exposure, let's say, this fascination with the US or Europe that is so open-minded, people are so accepting, this, that, la, la, la. I think it's a little bit of a misconception.

I: Yeah, it's not exactly like that.

A: Because I'm here now and I feel so much at home. I feel so happy. Yeah, okay, I'm native to this place, blah, blah, blah, but my soul is very happy here. Something I never felt in New York, you know, like the glitz and the glamour never made me happy. So, for sure, there are many beautiful things about the US. It teaches you so much about yourself, it teaches you about independence, it teaches you about sexuality. Or it did taught me. I cannot generalize. I was in New York, it's a different world if you compare it with the Midwest. Yeah, I don't know if I answered your question.

00:24:23

I: How was the relationship to your family during the time you left to the US?

A: It was fine. I would say I've never had a bad relationship with my family. It's always been good or cordial at least, yeah. But definitely, once I was there, I felt more free, yeah, because

my family was not there. So that anonymity helped living my life in my own way. But also, in some ways, I felt a bit strange because I was not really sharing about myself back then. Sometimes I have this South Asian guilt, let's say, that am I hiding something from them? Should I tell them? Will they understand?

So, to my sister, always, for example, sorry to go back. I came out to my sister when I was in high school. So, I was 15 years old, and she took it very well. She was like: "Yeah, don't worry about it." So at least I had her. She knew and I knew she would stand up for me. So, maybe that gave me a sense of comfort. Somehow, she'll convince my parents if they think otherwise. But because I never told them while I was there, there was always this, I don't know, weirdness. Because whenever they would come to visit, for example, I think in some ways I would shut this side of mine. And in retrospect, when I think, I don't know why I did that, because my dad had queer friends. So, it was not like a new thing for my family members, you know? But I don't know. But regardless, apart from this, this was the only thing I did not tell them. But apart from that, close.

00:26:32

I: During that time – I will talk about your sister and you coming out later on. But during that time, when you were studying abroad, did your family or relatives instil certain expectations or traditional values on you? Was marriage a topic and how did you deal with it?

A: So, in my immediate family, my parents never talked about marriage. Never. And also, the fact that my parents – my mom was 30 when she got married and this was a big deal for many Nepalis. And this was in the late 70s. So, my parents thankfully never forced the idea of marriage in the past. You know, oh you should be with someone. No, never. So, and the idea of marriage never appealed to me, quite honestly. My extended family, yes. Not extend, but they were like: "Oh when are you getting married? Or do you have a girlfriend? Or you like someone? Or when are you getting married?" Yes, this was around, but I never let it get to me, if that makes sense.

I: And how did you respond to that?

A: So, I would say different things. I would either say: "I'll think about it", or "oh, when the time is right, maybe I'll do it." Or I would just say: "I don't care. I don't want to get married. I'm happy." So that's how I tackled it.

00:28:18

I: So, after your studies, you returned to Nepal?

A: Yes, I returned to Nepal.

I: And when did you actually come out in front of your family? Like your parents?

A: Yes, so I came out to my parents in June of 2014. I had been wanting to come out. I had been wanting to come out. So, one fine day, I just decided: “Okay, today is the day, I’m going to tell them.”

I: And how did you do that?

A: It was very...

I: How did it happen?

A: Okay, so I’ll try to explain what happened. So, we were having dinner. And then I told my parents: “I have to tell you something.” And my dad was like: “What happened?” And I was like: “Well, you know, let’s have dinner. It’s going to be a long conversation. Let’s enjoy our food first, and then I’ll talk about it.” He was like: “Okay, fine.” So, we had dinner. We were just hanging out in the living room. It was my parents and me. My sister was also there, but she already knew, and she wanted to give me space, so she was in her room. And then, you know, I kept repeating: “Oh, I don’t know how you’re going to take this. I’m so afraid to tell you. I don’t know what your reaction is going to be.” My dad and mom were like: “What happened?” I kept repeating this over and over. My dad got irritated. He was like: “Okay, fine. I also had been wanting to tell you something. So, let me start.” So, funnily, what he said was: “Well, you know, now that you and your sister are grown up, blah, blah, blah, I was thinking of dividing the property between the two of you. Maybe someday you want to live on your own, and, you know, maybe you’re, maybe use the term partner. You and your partner, maybe you want to live together, and the same for your sister.” Blah, blah, blah. He said what he meant. And he was like: “Okay, now it’s your turn.” I kept repeating the same thing. I was like: “I don’t know how you’re going to react.” And there was a pause, and my dad was like: “Okay, are you trying to tell us you’re gay? Are you seeing someone?” I didn’t have to say anything. He already knew. They already knew. And that’s it. So, it was very easy for me, you know, that they knew. And what he said was: “Well, you know, we had been waiting for you to tell us, because we did not think it was our space to come and ask you, because it’s such a personal thing.” Yeah, so, yeah.

I: Did you ask them how long they already knew?

A: They said that they always knew, because I think they're parents, you know, they figured things out, right? Like, let's say, not having a girlfriend, not having a desire to meet girls. And some stereotypes, obviously, kicking, you know? Likes to dance, likes to do creative things, is very isolated, like, blah, blah, blah. So, they always knew.

I: How did you feel afterwards? What made the disclosure of you?

A: It was very emotional. Very, very, very emotional. It was really intense. Like, that day, it was already late at night. So, I went to sleep. I couldn't sleep, obviously. The next day, I was at work. And then around 2 p.m., I get an email, like a joint email from my mother and father. I'm sorry if I am going to be emotional (gets tears into his eyes). Please don't mind (laughs). So, it was a very touching email – I'm just going to breathe, sorry (starting to cry) – Where my father said something, or my parents said something like: "Dear Adi, thank you for disclosing, you know, your whatever to us. It has brought us immensely closer. Please know that it's not your fault. It's natural. And we are the reason behind it." (Crying). And then, I just went to the bathroom and cried. Yeah, I mean. So, it was very emotional for me. And of course, it again still took some time to come back to that normalcy because it's such a heavy topic. And actually, it took my mom much longer. Not that she had any problem with me being gay. But I think it took her a little bit longer to process and come to terms and accept and recognize that it's okay, you know. For my dad, it was instant. But for my mom, it took a long time. So, it was very emotional. I think that is the word I can use. It was very powerful. Yeah.

I: Very touching. Thanks for sharing.

A: Of course.

00:33:55

I: And can you tell me about your coming out in front of your sister? Like, what was the situation like?

A: It was funny. I think we were watching a Hollywood movie. I was 16 years old or 17 years old. I was on holidays from boarding school in India. And then, we were just watching TV. It was late at night. I don't know if there were some... The movie was about a teen being bullied. It was something irrelevant. And I just told her: "I have to tell you something." And she was

like: “Yeah, what happened?” I was like: “I think I'm gay. I like guys.” And she blushed a bit. And she was like: “It's okay.” And it just ended there.

I: And how did that feel?

A: I think, in a way, it felt... It felt good, but also it felt like nothing. I don't know how to say it. It was like telling your friend. And they already know. And they're like no problem. But I think to know that someone in the family knows is very comforting. Because sadly, a lot of people in Nepal don't have that privilege yet.

I: Yes.

A: So, yeah.

00:35:11

I: And when and how did you get to know your partner?

A: So, Thomas was – in 2015, he came after the earthquake to volunteer. And I saw him on Grindr, yeah. And then I messaged him. And that's how we met. So, it was Grindr or Planet Romeo. I'm not sure if it was one of those apps. Yeah, so it was a dating app. Yeah, that's how we met.

I: When did you introduce your partner to your family?

A: I actually introduced him as a friend. After a few months, we had started dating. But I didn't really tell my parents I'm dating. I think I told them maybe after a year or two we started dating.

I: And how did they react?

A: They were fine with it. I think they were happy. They were happy and they were like: “Oh, why don't you invite him for dinner someday?”

I: And how did you feel about it?

A: A lot of feelings, to be honest with you. In some ways, it felt strange. In some ways, it felt comfortable. Because strange in the sense, like... I don't know. You know, I think sometimes when you live in a heteronormative society and you are different, despite your family and your social circle accepting you, I can't even describe it to you, this feeling that you are still different. Although you've accepted yourself, there is no problem. I don't know, maybe the cultural

nuances kick in, because at the end of the day, Nepal is still a conservative, traditional country. So, that aspect is always somewhere near self-conscious. So, mixed feelings.

I: Did you have... Not an open relationship, but did you live your relationship openly here in the city? Or was it more like secretly?

A: No, it was very open. I mean, open in the sense... So, Thomas was living on his own at the time and I would visit him frequently and I was at his place a lot. You know, people saw us together quite often. I think the different landlords he had knew there was something going on, but it was never a problem. He never had any issue, and I was living openly, never hit.

I: How did it feel? Did you feel kind of free? Like the freedom you had before in the US?

A: Yeah, I did. I definitely did, because even when I did not come out to my parents, I was living life quite freely, because everyone knew, except my parents. My friends knew. Some of my cousins knew. Everyone knew, right? But again, because it was so personal, for some people, they did not feel comfortable asking. Because I worked on the same. You don't want to ask someone: "Oh, are you gay?" Right? So, it was the same for most of them. They never asked. I think I always lived openly. I never hit or was secretive about it. Yeah.

I: So, I assume you always or most of the time had good responses?

A: Yes.

I: Or more positive responses?

A: I would say so, yeah. Most of the time. I don't think I had any... I won't say any, but I don't think there were... Yeah, I can't think of too many negative responses.

00:39:35

I: And when did you get married?

A: We got married in 2018. October 2018.

I: In Germany, right?

A: In Germany, yes.

I: How did this come about?

A: Well, it was funny, you know. So, in some ways, we thought getting married would... I'm like being very honest with you and I hope this is confidential, but in some ways, we got married because it would make our lives easier. Because you can imagine, immigration makes things so complicated everywhere. I'm from Nepal, like a country with one of the shittiest passports. And, you know, I'm marrying a German, right? Like, the passport difference. You can already think what I'm trying to tell you, right?

I: Yes.

A: So, if we married... And at that time, Nepal had not recognized same-sex... Not that it's still recognized, but it hadn't really recognized any sort of same-sex marriage or union. But Germany had just legalized it, right? So, we thought, well, maybe this is the way for us to be together. Because you need a legal basis to be together, you know? Otherwise, it doesn't work, yeah?

I: Yeah.

A: So, I think legality was definitely one issue. We thought, okay, if we want to be together, then might as well make it legal. That was one reason. And, of course, the other reason was we wanted to be together. Yeah. So, things just...

I: So, were you, like, traveling to Germany to get married? Or were you two already living in Germany before?

A: No, we were actually in Nepal.

I: So, you were in Nepal, okay.

A: We were living in Nepal. And, funnily, he was in Myanmar at that time. He was there for a short-term assignment. And this is when this was all cooking up. Because I don't know how aware you are of the German law, but it's, you know, your country's bureaucracy is like...

I: Like, I have a couple of friends, like Nepali and German friends, who got married in Germany or in Denmark. And it's like (laughs).

A: Yeah, exactly. So, we... But we wanted to get married in Germany because we wanted all our friends and families to be there, yeah? That is why we chose to be in his hometown to get married. But the process and the bureaucracy is terrible. So, they give you a date. You have to marry on that date. If that date doesn't work out, you have to wait for another... I don't know

how many months, yeah? So, because of the bureaucracy, we had to get married at that time. But, yeah, sorry. So, he was in Myanmar. I was in Nepal. So, we were planning things from a distance. And, yeah.

I: It was difficult, I can imagine.

A: Yeah, it was just annoying. It was very, very annoying, yeah. And... This is working, right? We're fine?

I: Yes, yes. It's working. And how was your wedding day like? Like, what... Who came from Nepal to be with you and...

A: It was very Multikulti, as Germans would say.

I: Multikulti, that's true (laughs).

A: So, it was in this little town of... Where he's from, Malsch, yeah? It's not too far from Karlsruhe. So, it's very close to Karlsruhe. And... Probably the first gay wedding. I don't even know. Anyway, so it was very colourful, yeah? It was very colourful. So, my parents were there. My sister was there, her husband. My nephew was there. All my close friends from Europe were there from different countries. Some of my friends from Nepal were there. Some of my friends from the U.S. were there. And also, Thomas' friends from Germany and other places were there. So, it was very colourful. It was like a whole day affair like, the whole event. It was, for Nepali standards, it's a small crowd. It was like 70 people, I guess.

I: That's already a lot for Germans.

A: That's already a lot for a German because they can't handle it, right? So, it was a whole day affair where everyone was involved from the morning till late at night. So, all of us went to the... What is the... What?

I: Standesamt?

A: No, what is the city hall called? Where you sign.

I: Like the civil hall?

A: Yeah, you know what I'm talking about. Not the registry, the civil hall, yeah?

I: Rathaus.

A: Rathaus, yes. So, everyone was in the Rathaus. Everyone was at the reception. So, it was a whole day affair. Everyone was together the entire time. I think it was nice. It was colourful. People from two different continents, two different cultures, two different skin colours. The difference was very visible and prominent. It was nice.

00:44:34

I: And... When did you start the process here? Because you tried to be... Is it legal now here? I'm not...

A: Even I'm confused, to be honest with you.

I: So, you went in front of court, right?

A: So, we went in front of the court, because we wanted to move back to Nepal at one point. So, we were away, and then we wanted to move back to Nepal. So, in 2016 or 2017, a lesbian couple, a Canadian-Nepali lesbian couple, wanted to live in Nepal, too. But the Canadian woman was denied visa, because the argument, which is valid, I'm sorry, was that because the country does not recognize same-sex marriage. So, they went to the court, they fought, they won. So, there was already that precedent case, yeah? So, we were under the impression that, okay, maybe, because there is already a case, a successful case, Thomas will get the visa too. So, we went. And it was denied. Yeah, they were like... And we were like, well, but there was a lesbian couple. They were like... It was an individual ruling. That's what they said. So, anyway, that's why we decided to go to the court. So, we put in our petition in late August of 2022. And the verdict was out in December 2022. So, we were lucky. It did not take so long, actually, but we had already left Nepal, because Thomas' tourist visa was running out. So, he was always on tourist visa? Yes, he was. I mean, not necessarily. When he lived here before, he was here with the UN and GIZ. So, he always had the working visa. But this time, because he did not have a job, you know, he was on a tourist visa. Right? So, anyway. So, the verdict came out in December. We were not in the country. We were in Spain. And then my lawyer called me and said: "Hello, you won the case. Congratulations." But the verdict takes so long to come out in printed form, written form. And you cannot go to the immigration office just with a verdict and say: "Oh, give me the visa." So, you need the proper documentation from the court, the instructions of the court. So, that only came out in March, late March, I would say. So, by the time he got his visa, and everything worked out, it was April 2023, last year, yeah?

I: So, it almost took a whole year.

A: Yeah, almost the whole process which is actually not bad. We filed a case at the Supreme Court and there must be millions of cases. Because I remember the lesbian couple, it took almost two years which is also okay, but it didn't take so long.

I: That's still a lot of waiting and insecurity.

A: Yes, yes.

I: And now, what's the situation like? You can just go to Germany and stay there, and he can just go here?

A: German bureaucracy is totally different. We have not even tried, to be honest with you. I always go to Germany on a tourist visa. I have to apply. It's not like because I'm married to a German, I get certain benefits. Does that make sense? I don't have that. Maybe if we lived there, it would be different. But because we are based here, we are always based in other countries than Germany. But I always have to apply for a visa.

I: Okay.

A: So, yeah.

I: Okay.

00:48:11

I: Because you talked to the news, or newspaper articles came out and you got more into the public space, how was the reaction from the outside? And how did you feel personally in the middle of this discussion, this case?

A: A journalist approached me, somehow he got my number, and he called me and he's like: "I'd like to talk to you." And I was like: "Fine." Because he just said: "I'll talk to you."

He never said he's going to interview me. Okay. So, it's like, you know, we set up a time to meet and I'm under the impression like we're just meeting. You know, so he, I go to his whatever radio station or TV station, whatever it was, and I'm caught a bit off guard. And I'm like, so there were so many thoughts in my head. I was like: "If I don't speak today, I'll lose my chance. And if I speak today, then maybe I'm not doing justice to myself." Because I don't know if I'm ready to be, do you know what I mean?

I: Yes, yes.

A: I was in such a dilemma, but I thought of, okay, maybe this is the time to speak. I'll just. So, after it, so interview happened today. My verdict came out tomorrow. I was making coffee, and I hear my name and Thomas' name totally butchered, like on the radio. And I'm just like, and after that, oh my God, like, it was so intimidating. Our details were everywhere. Everywhere! And then the funny thing is, we had no control over it because apparently, just not just in Nepal, anywhere in the world, any case that is fought at the Supreme Court is actually publicly available. It goes into the public domain. It's the same in Spain, for example.

I: Oh, wow. I didn't know about that.

A: So, they can print out the entire details and everything was there. This happened, right? And then a week after this happened, my dad wrote his article. Everything was happening, boom, boom, boom, boom. And it was overwhelming. And of course, my dad's article got a lot of positive response, a lot of. Because he's quite well-known. Also in the international arena, it got a lot of good recognition. So, it was overwhelming. Supportive and nice and emotional, but also at the same time, my private life was out there.

I: Exposed, completely, right?

A: Completely exposed. My interview was everywhere. It was being shared. I don't know. It was just an intense time. And also, I have an autoimmune disorder, and I had just started taking steroids. And, you know, steroids really fuck up your mood and your body. Everything was happening at the same time.

I: A lot.

A: It was overwhelming. It was overwhelming.

I: And how long did it take until everything got a bit more settled? And you felt better?

A: I would say, maybe after Thomas got his visa, definitely one obstacle was out of the way. But then I was constantly dealing with media. Interviews, this, that. This went on for a few months. And also, June or July was coming up, and there were pride months and people were calling me to speak. And I obliged. No problem. I did it. I would say, maybe towards the end of the year, it slowly started to settle. Yes, two parts of the time.

I: Yeah, I can imagine that it's kind of exhausting or confusing that you all of a sudden become a public figure without having a choice.

A: Yeah, exactly.

I: And all exposed and people know about your life and personal details.

A: Yeah, exactly. I'm happy in a way, but I'm also worried because sometimes I hear horrific stories about gay men who are out and about and who are trying to travel to certain countries where it's forbidden or illegal. They get in trouble. Because I like to travel, you know? So honestly, it puts me in a position where I sadly cannot risk my life to go to certain countries, although I would like to. So, this is one concern I have.

I: I see.

00:53:14

I: And how do you feel today about the last year, the last two years?

A: I would say I feel very good because, let's say, in the end, justice was done, right? And more than anything else, I'm glad I think our case opened up avenues and possibilities for the debate around marriage equality to be stronger and more discussed openly. And whatever verdict the Supreme Court ruled last year instructing the government that same-sex marriages can be registered. I think, it was nice that eventually a lot of positive steps started unfolding. And it's a process, right? So, I think that's what I'm most happy about that despite having to go through, I don't know, humiliation in some ways and our private lives being exposed, something good came out of it. So, it's a good feeling that maybe we can give hope to other people from the community, or the family members of queer people maybe are struggling to tell. They're fine with it, but they're struggling to tell their relatives that, oh, my son or daughter is from the queer community. And I'm glad my dad fulfilled that role for me and many people look up to him. And as we say, you know, everything happens for a reason.

I: Yes.

A: So, it's a good feeling.

I: Okay.

00:55:13

I: And two more questions?

A: Sure.

I: And then it's over. How is today's surrounding here, for example, in Sanepa, your neighbours, your landlord, but also if your relatives, for example, face you two as a married couple?

A: Very positive, very well. I have no problems. Touch wood, knock on wood. We're very fortunate and privileged that I have a very open-minded family, not just my parents. None of my relatives have had problems with me being married. They've accepted me with open arms since the day, they know my story. And it's the same with my landlord. They're very happy that we live there and we're different. And the same in Sanepa, I think. Of course, Sanepa is a bubble, obviously, right? It's very different. What is the word? But it's very privileged.

I: Yeah.

A: Sadly, privilege is, in a country like, it's quite classist, you know? Like, if you have access to certain things, you have access to certain knowledge, you become more exposed and open to things, maybe. So, luckily, I've had no negative experiences apart from the immigration. But even there, like, the immigration officers were not condescending, yeah? When I told them I'm gay, they could have been like, but they were like: "Oh, okay, he's your husband?" This is a very special place. We have to deal with it differently and for me, that is positive, because I was not called (unintelligibly). Small changes.

I: Happy to hear that.

A: Yeah.

00:57:10

I: And why do you think, like, from a broader question, general question, it is difficult in a Nepali society to openly express your sexuality? If it's, like, not hetero.

A: It's a very, like, tough question to answer. But how I see it is, sadly, I think the wealth of traditional knowledge we have from this part of the world has always been very beautiful. But the way it got passed from generation to generation was misleading, not accurate. Yeah? And I think as a result of that, society has an inaccurate and incorrect understanding of, if I may, of Hinduism or the Hindu tradition. Because Nepal is predominantly Hindu or Buddhist, right?

Because if you look at these two religions, it is not that I'm an expert. I don't think they condemn queerness. We have queer gods, for example, right?

I: Yes, yes, I've read epics.

A: There you go, exactly. So, if God can be queer, we are just like their disciples or children, no? So, I think that is where something wrong happened along the way. I don't know what it was. I don't want to blame colonization. But not to generalize, but the same thing happened in India, before the British or the Dutch or the Portuguese came, it was different. Like, someone as famous as Akbar, who, like built Taj Mahal, had... Was it? Not, not, not... Anyway, someone like a famous ruler had a legitimate relationship with another man. You know, it was accepted back then. And if it is recorded in poems, what happened in between? I don't know. I think the way knowledge was passed was – something happened.

I: Yeah, something like a filter...

A: Yeah, I don't know what happened, right? I think that's where we went wrong.

I: Yeah.

A: So sadly, like, people started believing in things that are not true. And they've been practicing it for so long that now, it's suddenly become so conservative. Even the label conservative, I'm sorry, but it's a very Western idea to look at the world, you know? Just because you wear Burka, does not mean that you are conservative. Or just because you wear a bikini, does not mean that you are open-minded.

I: Yes.

A: It's the mind, you know?

I: Yes.

A: Because for example, so at my parent's place, so we have a Didi, right? She is not educated. She's never been to school, but she had no problem accepting the fact that I like men, yeah? She never apposed to it. Yeah, I'm just giving one person's example, but sorry, I don't think, only education can change you. Absolutely not. Even well-educated people are very conservative or heteronormative. Yeah, I think like sadly, we were talked around (laughs). And it's sad in our mind to we take maybe another few generations?

I: Yeah, a few generations to go in a direction again for more acceptance.

A: Yeah, I guess.

I: And awareness.

A: I guess, yeah.

I: I see. Is there anything else you want to say before I stop.

A: I don't know, let me think. Give me a minute to think. No, I don't think so, I think! If there's anything you want to ask me, you could. You can also email me if there is any additional input you want that might help you.

I: Thanks.

A: Sure, no problem.

I: Okay, then I stop?

A: Sure.

Participant Anush

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview IDs: I5_Anush_20240725_IA1

Interviewee: Anush, male, age 30

Duration: 00:27:54

Location, Time: Rainbow Disability Nepal, Kathmandu, 25.07.2024 at 1.45 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Semi-structured interview

Anush's residence: Baluwatar, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Social Worker, Head of Rainbow Disability Nepal (NGO)

Initial Contact: The contact with Anush was facilitated by Ben mid-July. Anush is an acquaintance of Ben, and Ben reached out to him to see if he would be interested in participating in an interview with me. Anush showed interest, so Ben shared his number with me. I wrote to Anush via WhatsApp, and he invited me to meet him at his NGO Rainbow Disability Nepal in Baluwatar on July 25th. I was already familiar with Anush's name from Niranjana Kunwar's book "Between Queens and the Cities", as a chapter was dedicated to him.

Background Information: Anush has a tragic life story: He almost burned to death as a baby (his right side shows severe burn scars, and he is missing a hand), and his parents died in the fire, leaving him an orphan. He grew up in various orphanages. A few years ago, Anush founded Rainbow Disability Nepal that supports disabled queer individuals, like himself.

Meeting at the NGO: When I arrived at his NGO, Anush was still in a meeting, so I waited for 45 minutes in the reception area. His office is located on the ground floor of a residential building. Once his meeting was over, his assistant/secretary showed me the way to his office. Anush greeted me warmly with a short hug and indicated that I should sit on the sofa while he remained at his desk.

Introduction and Consent: Anush briefly reintroduced himself and his NGO, and I reintroduced myself and the project. He verbally agreed to participate in the interview but stated that he did not need to sign the consent form. He asked me to start the interview right away due to his tight schedule.

Interview Process: I opted for a semi-structured interview approach for efficiency and organization. I began with an introduction, asking him to tell me about his childhood, adolescence and current life. Anush spoke for about 30 minutes, confidently and openly, but

kept his answers brief. He chose not to discuss certain periods of his life, which was entirely acceptable.

Post-Interview Discussion: At the end of the interview, Anush asked me to help promote his NGO. I offered to contact institutions in Austria with which I had collaborated earlier this year for additional funding. We concluded our conversation quickly due to his busy schedule, agreeing to stay in touch. As I was leaving, I admired the papier mâché figures scattered around his office, which he mentioned he made himself. He seemed pleased with the compliments.

Conclusion and Follow-Up: Overall, the meeting went well. It was a friendly encounter, and I felt that Anush trusted me to some extent. He was quite open and sometimes unfiltered in his responses. His body language was approachable and engaged. We agreed to stay in touch for potential future interviews.

Transcript 1

Date: 25.07.2024

Duration: 00:27:53

Interviewee: Anush

Audio File: I5_Anush_20240725_IA1

I: MS

A: Anush

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00:00:00

I: So, I would ask you to introduce yourself, your name, age, pronouns, if you feel comfortable, your sexual orientation, where you live, what your living situation is like, and your occupation.

A: I'm Anush, and I live in Kathmandu, Nepal. So, right here in this Baluwatar. And I'm a president of Rainbow Disability Nepal. This organization is mine. And my age is 30, and my pronoun is he, him. Just, I'm open with it, call me whatever the people like. And the other thing is, I'm a gay man, with a disability. So, yes.

I: Okay. And do you live alone?

A: Yes, I do.

I: Okay, okay.

00:01:02

I: So, I would like to ask you a bit about your life. Like, do you remember, like, your childhood and teenage years? How did you grow up, and where?

A: Yes. I was actually raised in an orphanage. Okay, so that means I don't have a family. I was raised in an orphanage, and it was a bit difficult for me to go through all the process. Because I was small, and also I was in an orphanage, and I could not understand myself, with my emotions and feelings. And besides that, I was being a disabled. It's like a bit of a very – it was so challenging for myself to understand why I'm different than other people, other, you know, the friends in that orphanage. Being a disabled and identifying, like, feminine was so different at that moment, and I was so tortured. I was, like, bullied every day. Till I passed out in class, I was constantly bullied. I was constantly tortured, sexually harassed every day and day, and not able to have anyone, family members beside you. It was a dark moment for me. But the other thing is, I did get knowledge, which was good. So, you can imagine, by yourself, you being disabled, and you identifying yourself as feminine, and being an orphan, it's too challenging.

I: Yeah, so many factors combine, and people are not used to that.

A: And that's how you get double and triple discrimination by everyone. So, people don't see this side of the person, how the child is, like, being targeted by others. For my condition, it was a bit hard comparatively to other people.

I: Yes, I can imagine.

00:03:36

I: Did you have, like, someone around you that you felt close with during your childhood and teenage years?

A: Yes, I was a bit close with my girl, like, lady's friend there. But it was only in the school days. So that was a good point for me to have a lady's friend beside me. But besides that, I had no one. No one. I had to do everything by myself. Either to show my emotions or to hide. I had to deal with it. There was no chance, there was no way for me to cope with that dark side of life. But thank God, I had a good friend. And she's still a good friend.

I: Okay, that's nice to hear.

A: And she knows basically my situation.

I: So, you had something, someone to make it up to you.

A: And now she's in Canada, studying Master. And here I am, I can't study.

I: But at least there's, like, mobile phone and video calls.

00:04:53

I: So, and, like, you lived in an orphanage, but school was not part of the institution. Did you go to another, it was two different places?

A: Two different places it was. And I was not accepted in even school. The teacher used to give me a nickname. It was very hard there as well, in the school level. Though we were from orphanage, they treated us very differently. Have you seen Annie's movie? Movie called Annie?

I: No, I don't think so.

A: I think you should watch.

I: How do you spell it?

A: A-N-N-I-E.

I: Annie? Ah, okay, like the name. Is it Nepali?

A: No, it's a Hollywood movie. And it's about orphan girl. That was the same, similar stories to mine.

I: Yes, I will look it up.

A: And school was not good. I was never accepted by teacher. I was always, you know, they used to hit with the scale. It was the situation of mine. And so, yes, I, after, yeah, this, that.

I: So, you dropped out after 10th class?

A: Yes.

I: And how old were you?

A: 16.

00:06:24

I: And what did you do afterwards?

A: I was renting a room. And I was living alone by myself. Though the orphanage was looking at me. In 2013, I was studying fine art. You know, the fine art? And I came out in media.

I: Ah, okay.

A: As a first person of Nepal, you know, to being a disabled and being a gay. I opened out in the media. And very next day, I lost everything. The orphanage kicked me out. And my scholarship, the education scholarship was boycotted.

00:07:05

I: Yes, yes, yes.

A: Yes, Pratik Sekhi? Hello?

00:07:16

I: So, you lost everything after you came out in media?

A: Yes.

I: What kind of media was it?

A: It was radio.

I: Radio, okay.

A: Radio station.

I: And what kind of scholarship did you get before from the orphanage?

A: The orphanage was providing me education scholarship. I was living there. But once I came out in media, I was not able to go back again. And yes, they left me alone again.

00:07:52

I: And may I ask how you proceeded afterwards?

A: That was a bit of challenging life for me for the five years, I would not talk about that things. Let's keep it a secret.

I: Yes.

A: But in – okay, let me just tell you about... After 2018, I worked with Blue Diamond Society here. That's how I get to get involved more. And to know about our LGBT community, my situation. And that moment, I had a bit of salary. So, I continued again my education of bachelor. And... Yeah, I think that's how I managed everything.

I: Okay. So, you did a Bachelor of Fine Arts?

A: Yes. No, bachelor's in social work.

I: Social work, okay.

A: Yeah, social work. But in my master's, I would like to study fine art.

I: Yeah, I also applied for fine arts. Before, I studied anthropology. But it's so hard to get a university in Germany.

A: For fine art?

I: For fine art, it's very, very difficult. And so, I do it on the side now.

00:09:07

I: So, can we get a little bit back in time? Do you remember your first experience of attraction to someone? Like physical or romantic attraction?

A: Yes, it was in my orphanage. And there was a question mark going on with myself as well. But I was very attractive towards the boys. I don't know, even if I now also, if I talk about the things, I get so much blushing. It was so good (laughs).

I: How old were you?

A: I think nine or ten, probably ten, maybe around teenage time. So that was good. And even at that time, I proposed to one guy. Two times, actually, I proposed to him. I liked him so much. And I said: "I like you. I don't know why, but I like you." And he said: "No, that can't be happening. You are a man, I am a man. So, these things don't exist." So that's the word that he said. And after passing out ten, everything was fading out.

I: Yeah, okay.

00:10:25

I: Did you have a relationship? Are you in a relationship right now?

A: Boyfriend?

I: Yes.

A: Kind of... Yes.

I: How open are you about it? Do people know? Or is it more hidden?

A: It's kind of more hidden. I wouldn't say I have a boyfriend, but I have a guardian that looks after me because I'm an orphan. And he provides me food in my plate. He gives me a shelter – not sex-wise. But he's my boyfriend, he's my family, he's my father. So, we do not have sex. But I can call him boyfriend. I can call him daddy. I can call him everything. And he's not Nepali.

I: Okay, so everything is kind of settled.

A: Yeah, and now he's been looking after me since 2018.

I: Okay, okay.

A: The moment when I lost everything, he was there for me.

I: That's good to hear.

A: He's actually a gay. But he's providing me everything. So, he's mentoring me. Besides sex, we do everything. And yes, so now also he gives me food. He looks after me. We are in Nepal. So that's kind of good.

I: Yeah, it's good to have someone like that. I can imagine.

00:12:22

I: So, okay, now again back to the coming out process. You did not have a good experience. And do you... Would you decide the same today?

A: About what?

I: About coming out. Would you do it again?

A: No.

I: If you have the decision, like if you can decide again, you would?

A: Yeah, I wouldn't come out. I would rather live a secret life. I would not encourage everyone to come out. Just keep it to yourself. I'd rather suggest everyone to – if you are gay, or bisexual, or queer community, just be yourself. That is good, but coming out in the media, like exposing yourself, is not good. Rather than doing that, work in your skill, work in your education, have a good life. That's what I would say. Because of me coming out in the media, I lost my education. It was hard for me, because being a disabled, above that, I could not cope with that situation. Nobody would cope with that situation. Imagine you being disabled, and you don't have any family members, and you are being part of a queer community. It's really hard. So, if I had a chance again, I would not come out, but I would work on education to make my life better.

I: I see, I see.

00:13:55

I: Why do you think it's especially difficult here in Nepali society for a queer person?

A: Because our country is poor. The country is poor, the people are narrow-minded, the people don't have education. People are very marginalized. We are not developed in any way. Looking at the scenario of years ago, it was so difficult. But now everybody is a bit educated. The time has changed, and everyone has an education. It's kind of improving, but also it's very difficult to cope with the Nepalese in Asian countries, because of the culture. It's better not to live here. Now I'm saying that I really don't want to deal with these cultural things. I don't like it.

I: Could you explain more about the cultural things that make it so difficult?

A: Yes, it's being a caste system. Here we have different castes, different cultures, which I don't like. I'm very liberal, and I'm very free. And I like to live as a human being, rather than living in the culture. So, once you get involved with the cultural situation, then you won't get out. The culture defines you to do one thing, which you can't do. Just take the example of Muslims and other cultures, where you can't even have freedom of speech, freedom of rights. So that's what we are fighting for, human rights. So being human yourself, once you get involved with the culture, that isn't going to go anywhere. It will take you down and kill you. So, I don't believe in culture, but rather than believing in yourself. Do hard work, and be realistic, and logically work for betterment. God is there, I do believe. There is a negative and positive scenario everywhere. I do believe that there is. And I do worship every morning. I light up incense. I like every culture. But saying that, the cultural thing is not good for human beings.

I: Yeah, it kind of keeps you in a type of cage. And it's difficult to escape.

A: Yes.

I: And if you escape, you somehow don't really have the choice to return.

A: Yeah.

00:16:38

I: When did you start with this project here?

A: This RDN project is... Should I turn on the fan?

I: Does it help? Because the mosquitos like my blood always.

A: Put it in three. You might get cold again.

I: It's fine. It's kind of refreshing.

A: Where were we?

I: How did you start with this project?

A: RDN is the first and only one organization working for queer disability. The sound is disturbing again. I mean, you can also turn it off.

I: I don't feel too much left. So, it's just like this question and then one more.

A: I reached the organization in 2022, November, 11. And this is the only organization working for queer disability rights in Nepal. And before this organization, there is no other organization working for queer rights. And this is how I came to be able to do something for my own community. I'm setting an example. Before this, you would only be able to see a portion of queer people with physical hands, proper physical body. And I think it was your first time seeing me as disabled and defining as gay. And this is my visibility, right? Now, I'm creating a visibility of queer disabilities here.

And you can see us in our social media as well. And so, this is what I'm doing right now. Advocating for our rights. And yeah, that's all.

I: Are you here alone?

A: Yes. I'm here. I'm living by myself alone here.

I: Yeah, that's remarkable.

A: Thank you.

I: Do you get funds from outside?

A: Yes. Right now, we are getting funds from international organizations as well. But it is very limited. And it's not sufficient. And for myself also. Even today, I gave all my savings. And for a few months, I still have to pay my own savings to run the project here and there. So, that's why I'm facing a bit of a challenge to run. But now, I'm migrating by opening the organization. And it's nice, really fun. And it's very hard.

I: If you don't mind, I was working for two... For the Catholic Church in Austria. It's kind of a church. And I was working for two church organizations doing translating, because I speak Nepali. For Nepali women coming to Austria, talking about their projects and their funding. If you apply for funds. And...

A: Are they Nepali?

I: No, no, no. They are right now funding Nepali organization.

A: But it would be good if you can connect.

I: Yes. Do you know hami dhajju bhai? I don't know if you know.

A: Yes, I know.

I: And Social Work Institute. And each year, they are looking for new partners who can apply. And if you want, I can forward you.

A: Yes, please. That would be helpful.

I: And I think the form is in English.

A: What is the organization name?

I: It's Dreikönigsaktion. Yes, it's German. I can write it to you. And I can send you the link. Yes, link please.

A: Yes, link please and I will go through the process.

I: And I can also, if you want to, if you are considering, I can also write the person in charge.

A: Obviously, that would be so good for me.

I: Yes, because I know how difficult it was to get funding.

A: Yes, yes. There is this middle among the people.

I: Yes, yes. So, this just came up to my mind. Okay. So, back to business. Yes. So... Actually, that's it. But anything else you want to say?

A: Yes. Please, like, we need your help. Yes. And just in your way, just share our social media business into your Facebook. Yes. Your social media. And just write about me something that

I'm doing this by alone. And we need more support from every international organization to collaborate, to work. And I also need, especially, I actually do want to study fine art in master. But the lack of funding is there. I don't have any savings now. So, if anybody could, you know, at least provide me for any support, that would be also good. Just randomly throw it in your social media.

I: Yes.

A: You never know. It might come up. So, that's the thing. And the other thing is, please do reconnect me with the lady.

I: Yes.

A: From Australia or Germany.

I: Austria.

A: Yes.

I: So, it's like church-bound, but they don't like to missionary things. It's just like that the church, the Catholic church in Australia gives the most money for projects abroad.

A: Oh.

I: Less than the government does. And that's why the church is so much involved, but they don't do like missionary things.

00:23:30

I: And so, if I use your interview for the project, I want to use your interview for my project. But do you want to be named or not?

A: It's okay. You can name if you like. Otherwise, it's okay.

I: Okay.

A: I'm very open. So, you can.

I: Okay. And if you want, my institute is just right now starting in LGBTQIA+ topics. And we are attending a conference and stuff. And I will also present. And this is like also options to get to know other people. And, yeah, academia takes time. Because at first, like, this stays in

academia. And then after a couple of months or years, we connect with organizations and things can actually come up. So, this is what I am hoping right now.

A: And also, this is great for yourself, for your CV because you are like taking a subject that nobody has ever taken before and worked on before. So, this would be great for you to highlight yourself and be a master in it. So, this is good.

I: Yes.

A: I don't think anybody has heard or seen queer disability people before. So, this issue is very unique and it should be out in mainstream for the LGBTQIA people to support us.

00:25:05

I: So, can I also like ask just for my personal interest. So, you go to like places and spread awareness.

A: Yes.

I: And people who identify as queer and are disabled, they get to know about you and can connect with you.

A: Yes.

I: So, they have like community.

A: No, we don't have those kind of things but whenever people call me for the orientation and sensitization, while we are pitching there, most of the people come out. This is how I get connected. Whenever I am in the panelist as a speaker in some of the programs or activities, they see me and they come out and they open up with me about their sexuality and their disability. So, that's how they connect with me.

I: Okay.

A: And from social media as well. So, obviously you know that in the gig I use the grindr apps. So, that's how I get to know people there.

I: Get to know people. Yes.

A: Very easy (laughs).

I: Yes. Yeah, someone else already told me that I should go on there to find people, but I think it's wrong for me to be on there to find people that are misusing this platform. So, I decided not to.

A: How many interviews are you giving?

I: I think right now you are my fourth interview. And I have another one in the evening, for example. And I do Nepal wide. So, I have a person from Jhapa as well. And a person from Nepalgunj. And some of my interviewees, it's a different method. I share the daily life with them. Many others don't have time for that. So, it requires a lot of time. So, we have many, many interviews. So, I guess it's around ten. Because it's more about the quality and not about the quantity. Because I want to tell individual stories and compare statistics. So, you get a closer view.

A: Okay.

I: Can I stop?

A: Yes, please. Thank you.

Participant Bikram

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I10_Bikram_20240910_IA1

Interviewee: Bikram, male, age 38

Duration: 00:31:22

Location, Time: Croissant Café, Thapathali, Kathmandu, 10.09.2024 at 12.20 pm

Method: Semi-structured interview

Bikram's residence: Maharajgunj, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Researcher, Humanitarian/Development Aid Worker

Background: Bikram is the ex-boyfriend of my good friend Ben, and we first met in 2022. When I began searching for interview participants, Bikram was one of the first people who came to min. Given that I perceived Bikram as somewhat reserved about his sexuality in 2022, I asked Ben whether it would be appropriate to contact him and whether Bikram might be open to participating. Ben encouraged me, saying that Bikram would likely be happy to hear from me, so I reached out to him on WhatsApp in early July. Bikram expressed interest in meeting, but he mentioned that his schedule was extremely busy. Our first two planned meetings were cancelled due to his work commitments, which often require him to travel spontaneously. Bikram works for an international NGO called 'People in Need' (PIN). PIN is a Czech non-governmental, non-profit international organization which focuses on disaster emergency response and recovery, advocating for and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, including those in geographically remote areas, historically marginalized ethnic groups, and individuals marginalized due to their age or gender identity.

First Meeting on July 30th, 2024: We finally met for lunch on July 30th, 2024. I picked Bikram up at his office in Thapathali, and we went to a nearby small restaurant for lunch. We had a casual and friendly conversation for about an hour, catching up on each other's lives since we haven't seen each other for over two years. I also discussed my research project with him, and Bikram shared that he had conducted research with the queer community in Nepal and internationally. He mentioned that in 2012/13, someone from the USA documented autobiographical accounts of queer individuals in Nepal in a book titled "Pride Climbing Higher", which includes his own story. He offered to lend me the book. I asked if he would be willing to participate in an interview for my project, and he agreed. As his lunch break was

over, we decided to schedule a separate meeting for the interview. I later received the book through Ben and read Bikram's autobiographical account before our second meeting.

Second Meeting and Interview on September 10th, 2024: We scheduled our second meeting via WhatsApp and met again during Bikram's lunch break. I picked him up at his office, and we returned to the same café for lunch. We chatted briefly, updating each other on the weeks since our first meeting, and then ordered our food. As we ate, we gradually began the interview. Bikram skipped a few questions, as the answers were already covered in the book I had borrowed and photocopied. Although Bikram spoke freely and in detail, his voice noticeably lowered whenever he mentioned words like "sexuality", "queer", "gay", or "homosexual". The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Afterwards, we continued to chat for a bit, and Bikram thanked me for focusing on this important topic. He had to return to the office by 1.10 pm for another meeting, so we said goodbye with a warm hug and expressed our hope to see each other again soon.

Transcript 1

Date: 10.09.2024

Duration: 00:30:53

Interviewee: Bikram

Audio File: I10_Bikram_20240910_IA1

I: MS

B: Bikram

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00:00:00

I: So, my name is Marie, I'm from the University of Vienna, currently achieving my Master of Arts in Cultures and Societies of modern South Asia. For my Master's thesis, I do a research project here in Nepal, which is about LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nepal and their autobiographical accounts. So, I will record this, if you don't mind.

B: Yeah, sure.

I: And now I would ask you to introduce yourself. Your name, age, occupation, where you live, how you live, whatever you want to say.

B: So, hi, I am Bikram. I am a development worker by profession, mostly in the non-profit sector in Nepal. So, I was born in Sindhupalchowk, which is like northern part of Nepal towards Tibetan border. And I studied public health during my undergrad and post-grad, and I also worked as a LGBTQ+ human rights activist, back in the day for a couple of years with the civil society organizations in here, and also with the UN. Now, I am involved, I am a full-time worker within one European non-governmental organization, doing a lot of work around gender equality, social inclusion, disaster management, climate resilience, and so many other things. So, yeah, glad to be here. I forgot to mention that I am currently like 38 years old, and my preferred pronoun is him, his, he, so, yeah.

I: And where do you live here, and how do you live?

B: So, I've been living in Kathmandu for quite some time now. After my school, let's say, I did my college undergrad here, and since then I've been living in Kathmandu. So, I live around Maharajgunj area of Kathmandu. So, yeah, I've been here for over 20+ years now, in Kathmandu.

I: Okay. I stop a bit.

B: Yeah, sure.

00:02:46

I: Can you describe your family in your childhood, teenage years, like who was living in your household, what was their occupation, who took care of you, and what were like gender roles?

B: Gender roles?

I: Yes.

B: So, like I said earlier, so, I was born and raised in Chautara, the headquarter of Sindhupalchowk district. So, my family was a very typical Nepali family. So, my mom, my dad, my siblings were there, two sisters and one brother. We all grew up together there. And my parents, they were more into the small-scale businesses. So, we used to own a shop that my brother carries on now. So, we used to have our own family business. That's what would engage my parents and then my sister. Thank you. My eldest sister got married quite early, very early, when I was still a small boy. So, that was there. And I think, like any other typical traditional Nepali family, we were sort of that way too, in terms of like how the roles were, you know, differentiated between myself, my brothers, my sisters, even among my parents, you know? So, yeah, that was the childhood I had.

And like while growing up, I think I was always a very introvert kid, not having many friends, just like studying and staying indoor. So, that was my childhood, you know, back in Sindhupalchowk.

00:04:44

I: And who was like the person you relied on the most in your family?

B: When growing up, it has to be my mother and my sisters, because my father was always out, so were my brothers. So, they were like a very, you know, outdoor kind of person. You know, they would hang out with friends, like go here and there all the time. So, most of my time, I used to spend with my mother mostly. And if not, with my sisters and my cousins too, if they were around. Because all my uncles, aunts, we used to live in the same neighbourhood. So, even without cousins, most of my cousins were my age. So, we were more like friends. So, we used to do all the things together.

I: And besides your cousins and your sisters, did you have close friends from school?

B: Yeah, very few. Very few, I would say. Maybe two that I really felt very close, but not close enough to maybe disclose everything and anything about myself then.

00:05:57

B: Because I knew that I was a bit different than my other peers, especially my friends and all. But I wasn't sure what it was. Later in my life only that I realized about my sexuality when I

started my exploration time and all, but growing up back in the school days, I don't think none of my friends knew. Because I never disclosed my identity to them. So, they were close, but not that close in that sense.

I: And how did you feel, what made you feel different from the others?

B: Oh wow, that's a very interesting question. Because growing up, and I think it's not just in Nepal, but everywhere, how everyone is raised in terms of how the society functions, right? The expectation that they have and the stereotype that is there in terms of your gender roles, in terms of your own sexuality too. So, there is no... Because it's a very heteronormative society, so by default you are expected to fall under that category. But when growing up, you have your own different identity in terms of sexuality, right? Who you attract. Because during those early teenage, that is the time you realize, okay, what are you more attracted to? What are your interests? And who do you define as an individual too? Because growing up, there was always a conflict against my own interests and how that would fit into the societal norms, the heteronormative norms. That was a real struggle. That's why I always felt I may not fit into that heteronormative norms that the society and we usually operate into. So, that's why I used to feel a bit different. Maybe that's not for me, or maybe I am not normal, or there is something wrong with me sort of, that kind of thinking, you know?

00:07:57

I: And when did you first realize about your sexual orientation?

B: I think, it was in my early teenage. I was in grade 7 or 8. You know, like how the usual kids, as they transition into the puberty, and so many physical changes, emotional changes, even how you connect with people socially, you know? That things happen. The same thing happened with me too. So, I must have been in grade 7 or 8.

I: So, you were like 13, 14?

B: Around 13, 14, yeah. I started to have that emotional and social attraction, connection with your peers, and even in your classroom, you know, because the whole pop culture, the movie culture has influenced so much that they tend to be open about who they are attracted to, who they like, romantically like, and all. So, I think it was during that time, plus 7, 8, if I remember.

00:09:03

I: How was your school experience? Is it like a good memory, or bad memory, or neutral?

B: I think it's a mixture. It was good in a way that, because like I said, I wasn't a very outgoing, social kid, but I was more into books, indoor, kind of like a geek. My friends used to call me a geek, you know. But I think I would take it as a good experience, because that kind of like, you know, when all the kids are always playing, not studying, and all of that, you tend to stand out, right? Like the teacher would notice you, because you studied really well. So I was that kind of student, you know. But on a negative side, I used to get a lot of bullying, even from my teachers, which was so unfortunate, but from my siblings, my friends, everyone. I didn't know what it was then, but when I look back and realize: "Okay, that was a bullying." Because that was a norm then, you know. Like if you don't fit into the certain stereotypes, or what is expected from you, then you are subject to those kind of bullying. So, I kind of like normalized it, you know, even though it kind of bothered me a lot, mostly emotionally and mentally. So, I would say my childhood was a bit so (unintelligible), you know? But if I look back, and if I get an opportunity to change anything, I think I would change a certain part of my childhood, especially being comfortable with my own sexuality, you know. And then like being confident enough to talk about it with my peers, with the family, which today's generation kids do that. I did not do that, because Sindhupalchowk was very remote, and there would be no conversation at all, even in books or movies, outside of the norm, you know. So, it was very difficult for me to get familiar with what I was and trying to figure out my own journey.

00:11:11

I: And may I ask what kind of bullying that was? Was it because of your behaviour, because of your outer appearance, your interests?

B: So, it was mostly teasing, especially in terms of how you express yourself, let's say, how you talk, how you walk, your mannerisms, your gestures. It was mostly based on that, and they would usually bully using very typical words. I think, you have already heard that, right? I really, really dislike that word.

I: Yeah, I mean, I know one. I heard it a lot.

B: Yeah, so that's, you know, those kind of things, you know. And also, like trying to make a comment, like being a man, you know, the patriarchal mindset in being a man, you are supposed to, you know, behave a certain way. I remember one particular conversation I had with my brother. Like he used to tell me, how I wasn't man enough, and how you may be subjected to

all this kind of bullying, or your future might be in risk, people might take advantage of you, because you are not man enough. He used to try to prep me, you know, you need to talk a certain way, you need to walk a certain way, you have to have a certain management view, so that people don't take advantage of me. I think he did that just to protect myself, but at the same time, that was something – because that's not going to help me, right? So, yeah.

I: I see. I'm sorry to hear that.

B: Well, it's all in the past now. I've come a long way, so it's fine now.

I: Okay.

00:12:56

I: Do you remember, if you want to talk about it, your first experience of attraction to someone, specifically?

B: Yeah, I think it was when I was in grade 8, 9. Because I would be very careful, because he's married now, he has a kid, we used to be best friends, he was not in my class, he was a senior, but we used to spend a lot of time together, especially when we had a break, like the lunch break, or before the school, after the school. After school, we were studying together, so we were really, really close. And I'm pretty sure that that was my first romantic attraction, let's say, towards another person of same gender. So maybe that's why also I realized, you know, I'm gay.

I: Okay.

00:13:55

I: Did you open up to someone about that at that time?

B: No, I mean, I think it was rather a bit late. I think I opened up only after I finished my master's degree, post-grad. Meaning that all, until then, this part of my life was still just with me – not even my friends, not even my family, no one else, it was just me. I was all then at 23, 24, until I was 23, 24, so it was like a hidden secret that was just with me.

00:14:42

I: I will come back to this later on. I will stick to your teenage years first, if you don't mind. Did the relationship to your family change during your teenage years, because you were realizing that, about your sexuality, and that you don't fit in there?

B: Not really, because during my teenage and growing up period, let's say, since I was already, because even I wasn't sure who I was, I was in my exploration time, so I did not do anything that was way beyond the norm. So that is why, I think, my relationship with my family remained as it is, nothing changed, even when I came out to them, I know it disturbed them a bit at the beginning, but it's pretty cool with everyone now. My siblings, my cousins, everyone, nothing has changed. It disturbed them a bit, they were a bit worried about my future, you know, again, that heteronormative family value, the family structure, how that would be, because they have no idea how it works for the same gender couple. So they were worried about that part, but other than that, nothing has changed in terms of my relationship with my family, and even with friends, yeah.

00:16:15

I: Do you remember any social and family expectations or values that were instilled or implemented on you during your teenage years, like the topic of marriage, for example?

B: Always.

I: Always?

B: That's always, but not with my immediate family now, because they know. So, there is not much pressure, but I still get that kind of questioning, let's say, from my distant relatives, or even friends who do not know about, who I am not open yet. So, I think it's okay. I know how to handle those questions. It used to bother me a lot when growing up, but not anymore.

I: And how do you handle a question like that?

B: You know, marriage, I mean, for me now, I think the whole concept of marriage as an institution itself, in this evolving situation where there are several people in a very unhappy and unsuccessful marriage, right? So, my response would be, you know, I would only marry when I'm sure about, because it's my life and it's my decisions, and it's going to change my whole life course, so it has to be me, not any other forces, you know? So, I take their suggestion with due

respect, but I'm not going to follow that. So, you know, it will be about me feeling right about that moment, right?

I: I see, okay.

00:17:51

I: Do you want to get married at some point?

B: Maybe I do.

I: Yeah?

B: Yeah, maybe I do, I don't know when, but I think I do. If not marrying, maybe a companionship?

I: Yes.

B: Like I said, the whole idea of marriage as an institution itself is a very, I find it a very outdated in a way, because that was set again by the societal norms and all. At the end of the day, you need to be happy, and you need to be, you know, content and all. If I can get that without getting married, then I'm also happy with that.

I: Yes, I mean like you can have like a partnership with someone, a relationship with someone, just have a companion by your side, and start having, I don't know, a paper signed.

B: Extra packages, right? Exactly.

I: And spend thousands of rupees on it.

B: Waiting (laughs). True.

00:18:44

I: So, I've read this, and you also talked about your coming out in the story as well. But may I ask, why did you feel after your master's that you need to tell?

B: I think I have already shared in this book "Pride Climbing Higher" about how I was and how I transitioned to be a person that I am today, right? So, because I went abroad to do my post-grad, that was an opportunity also for me to explore my own sexuality, because it was only

there that I managed to make friends – friends of my own kind, let's say, gay friends, let's say, like we used to hang out, go clubbing and all of that. And I sort of realised that, you know, if I don't disclose myself to those people who are very close to me, I would be leading a very double life even to them. So, I kind of felt it would be much more easy for me and also for them to know who I am as a person. But I already made my mind that, you know, if they don't accept and they were not meant to be friends with me, and if they accept, then that's great. You know, that was my mentality. So, initially I came out to my cousins and then my best friends, and only after that to my siblings, you know. Because it is important for them to know me, the true me, right? Not the half me or a part of me only. So, that was the feeling that I felt. So, I kind of like felt that, you know, I should tell them more. They deserve to know who I am as a whole person.

I: Did you come out to your parents by any chance?

B: Not as, you know, in a very typical conventional way of coming out, like: “Hey, mom, hey, and all of that.” Not in that way, but I came out in a very different way, meaning that, you know, trying to let them know the different emotion of a family, how a family can happen, a marriage or a companionship, you know. That way, you know, like a subtle, in a very subtle way, giving them knowledge and information about, you know, same-sex relationship and how, you know, things happen, change, you know? That way, but not directly to my parents, you know.

I: Okay.

00:21:28

I: How did the decision to come out shape who you are today?

B: I think that was one of the best decisions, I would say, you know. First, to coming out to myself, because I was struggling to even come into terms with my own sexuality. So, that was the biggest battle and hurdle that I had to face, like I said, you know, all my childhood, all my, even like early twenties, you know, because I was struggling so much that I lost all those years of being me. But once I came to a term with my own sexuality, started to come out with my friends and the close ones, you know, it made things so easy for me to not pretend and not hide anything, but be very open to have those conversations with my friends and all, you know. Otherwise, you would always be very careful, you know, like, should I say this? Should I say that? Even if you are dating, let's say, how do you lie about that with your friend? Because someday they are going to find, right? But after I came out to them, you know, it was easy for me to even not lie, but just tell the truth and facts.

So, it had changed a lot. That's why I think, because I had a really long struggle coming to terms with my own sexuality. So, that's why I think it was, I realized after I finished my postgrad and I think I read it, I somehow, somewhere wrote it in the book too, that it was important that I do something around this kind of issue, you know. That's how I got into the activism world with the civil society organizations, you know.

I: Yes, yes, yes.

B: Trying to, you know, let other people know that this exists and all of that kind of thing.

I: Okay,

B: So, I think it was really, really important and I'm glad that I did that because all those experiences, all those networks, all those people I met during that journey had saved me to be a person that I am today and mostly in a very good way. So, I'm really glad, you know, I took all those big decisions. It was a bit risky because I remember when I first told that that I'm doing this activism work and all of that, I got a lot of setbacks and not so good suggestions from my professors. I think I said it there too.

I: Yes, yes, to your Nepali professor.

B: My friends and even, yeah, they were not quite sure if that was the right thing for me to do given how Nepali society was back then, like 10, 12 years ago. But I'm glad that things have changed so much now. And of now I think I'm open to a lot of my office colleagues who we talk about this issue very openly, you know. So, it has made life much more easier for me.

I: I like how your face brightens up when you talk about it.

B: (Laughs). Thank you.

00:24:26

I: So, last question. Why do you think it is difficult in Nepali society, in South Asian society, in Asian society to openly express your gender and sexuality if you are not heterosexual or not like binary?

B: I think Nepali society, maybe to some extent in the South Asian context, apart from areas where there is a very rigid religious fundamentalist, right? I think we as a society are much more tolerant compared to the other civilizations and other countries, right?

I: Like Pakistan, Bangladesh, for example?

B: Yeah, even there, I think the third gender identity, they are much more tolerant. Let's say, imagine the countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia or Africa, you know, like how you could get a death sentence, right? Just for being who you are. So, at least that is not the case here. But having said that, the biggest challenge, we as a society have in terms of accepting all these different sexualities and gender identities are deeply rooted in our patriarchy. And the patriarchy kind of reinforces the idea of heteronormative social norms and values. And it's so difficult for people to come out of that belief system because you are challenging the norms and beliefs that has been there for centuries, right? So, that's why people are a bit uncomfortable, people are a bit scared to openly accept this. That's why I think even though when I came out, when a lot of my other friends came out to their parents, they were okay about it, but they were scared of the society. It was more like a conditional acceptance, which isn't the case lately, fortunately, in urban areas. But I think the main reason is because of our religious belief system, the patriarchy, and the very set heteronormative structures and beliefs that we have. That is the biggest bottleneck, I would say, even when there is a lot of lobby going on within government, in terms of same-sex marriage or marriage equality, or equality in general for sexual and gender minorities people, then the first thing they would always come up with is: "What about our values, what about our culture?" How that culture is shaped of from the religious and the heteronormative values. So, it's difficult for them to come out of that, to also accept what it is.

I: Yeah, but on the other side, it's interesting for me, as an outsider, that in Hindu mythology...

B: True.

I: It's not heteronormative.

B: It's not, that's true.

I: How it changed over the centuries.

B: This has also to do with the colonial history that the Indian subcontinent in general has, because before pre-colonial times, let's say, before the 17th century, it used to be there. The non-binary gender identities, the homosexualities, it used to be there, even in a lot of our religion is there. I think it was brought by the colonial mindset, I would say, right? And I think that was when the whole penal code was introduced in India, that kind of dispersed into many other

countries. Interestingly enough, because Nepal wasn't colonized, never colonized by anyone, that's why we don't have that penal code. But anywhere else.

I: But still impacted.

B: No, we don't have that!

I: But I mean, like, from the values, from colonization.

B: Yeah, but at least not in the constitutional laws or something.

I: Yes.

B: We don't have that, unlike in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, who were ruled by the colonial power back in the day.

I: I read a couple of papers, scientific papers, about how British colonization and also Hindu nationalist movements in the 21st century shaped Hindu beliefs as they are today, and not as they used to be 2,000 years ago.

B: Yeah, I think, in our religious texts, the sexualities of all kinds, the gender identities of all kinds were very much celebrated. It was there.

I: You can even see it in the temples here.

B: Exactly, it's there, right?

I: It's like two men having some intercourse.

B: Yeah. It's interesting how things change depending on how the politics goes, the geopolitics work, and also a lot has to do with the geopolitical changes that happened in the subcontinent in the past two, three years, two, three hundred years ago only.

I: Yeah.

B: Otherwise, yeah.

I: That's such a huge impact.

00:30:02

I: Is there anything else you want to say?

B: Not really, but I'm glad that we – this is a very interesting conversation that I hope it will come out as a research piece one day, not just with my story, but with many others. And it will hopefully reach out to all those people that are very rigid in terms of their mindset, in terms of their own belief system and bring a bit of changes in their own circle, families and also that we don't have to worry. It shouldn't be issue, we have to normalize this.

I: Yes.

B: And also, we are a part of the society, and we all need to co-exist together.

I: That's true, that's true, you are right. Well, thank you for talking to me.

B: Thank you! I hope, I was helpful to you?

I: Of course.

B: So, good luck with your research and everything.

Participant Binod

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview IDs: I6_Binod_20240725_IA1

Interviewee: Binod, male, age 25

Duration: 00:46:35

Location, Time: Café Soma, Kathmandu, 25.07.2024 at 3.00 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Semi-structured interview

Binod's residence: Pepsicola, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal; Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

Occupation: Master Student of Gender, Sexuality and Women Studies

Introduction and Initial Contact: I actually met Binod immediately after my interview with Anush. As I was leaving Anush's NGO, I noticed a male-presenting person waiting in the reception area for Anush. After the meeting, I walked through Baluwatar towards the main road to order a ride home. I once turned around briefly and saw the person from the reception area following me. Thinking nothing of it, I continued walking. He caught up with me and introduced himself in English as Binod, a MA student conducting research for his master's thesis. He was at Rainbow Disability Nepal because his research also focuses on the PoMSOGIESC+ community in the Kathmandu Valley. I was surprised by the coincidence and introduced myself, briefly mentioning my research. We both laughed at the serendipity, and he suggested that I interview right away if I had time, as he had three spare hours to kill before his next appointment. I gladly agreed, and we walked together to the nearby Café Soma, which I visit often and is relatively quiet.

At Café Soma: Upon arrival, we sat down opposite each other at a table in the garden, ordered tea and juice and chatted casually to get to know each other better. Binod told me about his academic background, his stay in Nepal this year, his research, and his plans to make a documentary film. After about 20 minutes, I asked if we should start the interview. Before beginning, I had him sign the consent form.

Interview Process: I started the interview with an introduction and asked Binod to introduce himself. I then asked about his childhood, adolescence and current life as a queer person. He spoke extensively, with a lot of detail. He emphasized several times how happy he was to be an interviewee and part of a research project, rather than being the researcher. Throughout the interview, he seemed very comfortable, which made me happy. The interview gradually turned

into a dialogue, and after about 45 minutes, we digressed significantly from my topic, so I stopped the audio recording.

Post-Interview Conversation: We stayed for another 45 minutes, discussing our research questions, methodologies, my challenges as a white researcher in the field, and his advantaged as a Nepali researcher. Eventually, it got late, and I mentioned that I had to leave. Before saying goodbye around 4.30 pm, we exchanged Instagram handles to stay in touch, and he wanted to take a selfie with me.

Conclusion: The meeting left a very positive impression on me. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. Binod appeared cheerful throughout and repeatedly expressed his happiness about approaching and getting to know me. He will be leaving Kathmandu for about two weeks, but we plan to meet again in mid August.

Transcript 1

Date: 25.07.2024

Duration: 00:46:33

Interviewee: Binod

Audio File: I6_Binod_20240725_IA1

I: MS

B: Binod

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I: So, I introduce myself, my name is Marie. I'm from Germany, studying in Vienna at University of Vienna. I studied anthropology for my bachelor's and now doing my master's in South Asian studies, specialized in Nepal and sexuality and gender. And my research project is about being LGBTQIA+ in Nepal and how people belonging to that community can like, or like being Nepali LGBTQIA+ and how Nepali queer persons can find their space in Buddhist/Hindu traditions, but also like conservative, heteronormative, patriarchal family expectations and values. Yes, that's what it is about. So, can you introduce yourself, what's your name, age, pronouns, where you live and how you live and your occupation, please?

B: Sure, I am Binod, I'm 25 years of age. I identify myself as a queer man, so when I mention queer, I don't put myself into any box like gay, bisexual, pansexual. So, you know, I just identify as a queer person because it's more flexible to me. And I did my bachelor's in development studies, where, do I have to tell about my research or not? Do I have to tell about my research?

I: If you want to, but...

B: I don't have to?

I: You don't have to.

B: Okay, so I did my bachelor's in development studies. Now, till then I lived in Nepal and it's just been a year since I moved to the United States of America, where I'm doing a master's in gender and sexuality studies. There I live with, I have a roommate who's also a Nepali, and here I live with my family in Nepal.

I: Where in...

B: Nepal?

I: Yes.

B: So right now I'm living with my grandparents in Pepsi Cola, Kathmandu.

I: Yes, I know this.

B: But my parents are in Bhairahawa. It's nearby Lumbini.

I: Ah, okay, okay, I know, I know.

00:02:35

I: So, can you take me through your childhood and teenage years? Where and how did you grow up and what people surrounded you?

B: I was born and raised in the western part of Nepal, which is Bhairahawa. My parents wanted me, wanted to have... I'm their second child, but they really wanted to have a baby girl. I have an elder brother, so maybe because of that they always wanted a girl child. But when I was born as a male, and they're kind of shocked because, you know, they're expecting it to be a baby girl. And in Hinduism, it's a thing that people predict your baby's gender identity, and while it's a gender identity, it's just male and female to them. So, they were like: "Okay, okay, girl, you're gonna have a baby, a baby girl." So, but they were not expecting me to be a baby boy for them. So, they're like shocked, but like, it's not like they hated me. It's not like that, nothing like that. And I have an elder brother, so I used to play with my cousins. Cousins, all of them, like, I was very comfortable playing with my women or girl friends. So, it was fun playing with them. I never liked anything which is more masculine. I was like very, like, on my feminine side. And during my school, they did that, which was very, like, tough at times. Is it disturbing?

I: No, no, it works.

B: Yeah, during my school, it was very tough because I had to act more masculine sometimes, just for the sake of not getting discriminated by my classmates. Of course, it did hamper through my education, mental health and everything. My parents were like supportive towards me, not because I was queer, but like, you know, to my feminine side. They're like: "Okay, you do whatever you feel like doing." But sometimes when other people from my community visit my house and they're like, your boy is feminine, please correct him. You know, the moral policing towards your child. So, they're like: "Son, I mean, please don't do this." And I was like: "Okay." But then I used to steal my mom's – so there's a long shawl, like a scarf, long scarf and I used to hide it in my room. And as a coping mechanism, I really used to play with that, because that's what a lot of women wear. So, to impress my femininity, I always used to wear my scarf and be the heroine of myself. But with time, I became more masculine. So, it's like I'm happy right now because I am like masculine, feminine and non. Yeah, if it answers to you.

00:05:53

I: Can you, can I go a little bit back to your family? Like, did you live in a joint family? Like who was part of the household back then?

B: It was a nuclear family. Just me, my father, mother and my elder brother, which is like two and a half years elder than me.

I: Okay. And what were your parents' occupation?

B: My father used to be a teacher. My mother used to be a house manager, or you know, housewife.

I: And who took care of you the most?

B: It really depends. It really depends, because both of them took care of me. But my father was the breadwinner of my family. However, my mother was a caretaker of our family. Despite being said that they were like very caring about me, my father, my mother. So, when it came to caring, the more masculine thing is to prefer my father, like taking me to hospitals, you know, but like maybe feeding me and such thing was done by my mother. But if I have to say, I would say like, it's kind of equal, but it's just like very gendered.

I: Did you feel more comfortable with like one side of your parents?

B: I was more comfortable with my mother. And it's a lot of Nepali people are more comfortable with mother.

I: Because the mother is like more present, more there?

B: Yes, that's because of that. It's very gendered. I see like most of my friends of my age, because back then a lot of women still – but like back then it was more – so a lot of women used to do household chores. And because of that, they get to spend more time with their kids. Because of more presence of my mother, I'm more, you know, attached with my mother.

I: Okay, I see.

00:08:13

I: Could we delve a little bit more into your school experience? Like now, how are your feelings about school when you think about your school days back then?

B: I absolutely hate my school. When I said this to my friends, they were like shocked, like, “why do you hate your school? We miss our school life.” I'm like: “Not me, not me.” I never wanted to go to school. Because first thing, it was very gendered. Like, you know, the

segregation about male versus female. Males would be seated like on this side, and women or females would be seated on this side. And I didn't feel much comfortable sitting with my male friends during that time, because I used to, you know, like to talk to my female friends. And I remember a time when my teacher told me my handwriting is very feminine. And I don't know what feminine handwriting looks like.

I: Yeah, what is feminine handwriting?

B: I don't know. So, it was my turn, he was checking my entry sheet. And he saw my face, like I was like there. He's like: "This is pathetic. Your handwriting is very feminine." And he literally threw my copy on the floor. Like, I still don't get it. But he did it. I hated him so much. My science teacher called my parents and told them that your child is abnormal. And he called me dumb, very slow and they need to do something to have a better future. I started hating science. And I never liked maths, but I used to like science. So, I always hated them. And because of that, maybe it impacted on my career path. So, after that, I did my high school, I only had two options, either science or management, I did management. After that, I did social science. And it's heaven. Trust me, it's heaven. So, am I answering it well?

I: Yes, yes. Perfect. There's no right or wrong.

00:10:42

I: May I ask about your first experience of like physical romantic attraction? How old were you?

B: I was in grade six. There was a friend, a newcomer in the classroom. We were on the same school bus. I used to buy chocolates for myself. I used to give some chocolates just to like everyone who was in the bus. That way, I gave it to him as well, because, you know, oh, I find it so cute. So just to make him feel more inclusive. But my main motto was to just get to know him. I was very attracted towards him. And later we became friends. And he like and after that, the, you know, attraction thing like just flew up. But then a lot of time it used to like, you know, pop up, especially when you're a teenager. Is it okay to go like more deeper?

I: You can.

B: But I don't have to. Or like, what is it? Is it better or not?

I: It would be interesting for me.

B: So yeah, I never talked to anyone with this. I took people's interview, but I never shared and to get a chance to talk about myself. So yeah, it was grade 8. We were sitting together with boys. They were talking about their genital size. I was so interested in like, knowing that. But when it came to me, I was like, super scared to tell about myself. I was like, I pretend that I was writing something. But at the same time, I was just hearing their conversation. So, it was like, you know, that was like some time that it was so much butterflies in my stomach. But when I went to washroom and the same friend told me to share or to show what my size looks like. I never liked that conversation. I stopped using washroom for 8, 9, 10. I used to drink water at 9.30 am because my school time was 10 to 5. Drinking water at 9.30, entire day eating nothing, no drinks, nothing at all. After 5, coming home and going to washroom, eating water just after that. It impacted on my health. Just because I was about to harass in the washroom. Not just that, people started touching it in the classroom. Well, when I was sitting in last bench, because there used to be rotation in the classroom. So today is last, tomorrow second last, you know, it just works backwards. It was horrible experience.

I: But may I ask like, why especially you? Because you did not want to tell openly and then they made fun of you or?

B: Because I was not stick to the traditional gender norms about man being masculine. I was very impressing, not impressing also, but like, you know, I was more on the feminine side. And it used to create curiosity on them like, who is feminine? Like, what is his genital look like? That's, I can assume it now. Like, they've never told me this way you're feminine. Not that way. But like, you know, I just, I can tell you 100%. It's because of that.

I: I'm sorry that that happened to you.

00:14:26

I: Did you have better experiences in school like after class 10 when you went to college?

B: During high school, I was attracted to one person who is also a man, straight man, turned out to be my best friend for life. And for that I started caring, you know, the small caring like, you know, like, how's it going, asking, talking, we became good friends. I never used washroom during my 11th and 12th. Like, never.

I: But the people who harassed you were not in your college?

B: No, no, no.

I: But you were like, so traumatized?

B: Wait, wait.

I: Yeah.

B: So, I changed my school in grade 8.

I: Yeah.

B: And during 9th and 10th, I changed, I studied in different school. But for my +2 – we call it +2 here – for my 11th I changed, I mean, all of us changed. We go to high school. I met the same person there, but with more decency, with more maturity. We talked, I was scared to talk. We used to sit on the same seat sometimes. The conversation never came. He never appointed me. Later, during my undergrad, I used to work at NGOs, I used to work as an actor. Also, after my 10th, I started doing modelling. Because of that, people had a very high image about me. So, I did not have to face that much of discrimination or hatred. The same person was talking highly about me. He's my family friend as well. He used to be not like, we don't, we're not connected right now, but we never had such conversations. The same guy, we studied together, different subjects, but together. I was traumatized to see him for a good few days. After that, he was like: "Hi Binod, how's it going? I'm happy that we are together again, same college." It's like, okay, yeah, and I found him more, he had changed a lot.

I: I see.

B: Yeah, I never thought about it, like never.

I: That's crazy that your path aligned again. Do you still somehow keep in touch with people from back then?

B: I do.

I: Yeah, but only, but not with him.

B: With him?

I: Yeah.

B: I mean, if I meet him on the street, I'm like: "Oh, hi, how's it going?" So, I mean, I don't hate people. Now I can say that I was and I'm still a people pleaser. And I want to prove people with my work, they can see my work everywhere. It just sorts them out. And I think that's the best example. Also, I don't see their entire fault. It's the fault of the entire society and they're also a part of it, I would say. But, I mean, of course, it's their fault, but like, I don't blame them personally. So, I'm like, if I see anyone, I'm like, okay, I'll talk. I don't have any issues. I don't hold grudges. I mean, if they want to, like, if they're right now okay, why was I feminine? I can take them to some cafes and teach, literally teach about work, gender and sexuality. So, I'm like, there was a friend, a girl space friend, like girlfriend, female friend. She always used to ask me, like, prove me you're a man, prove me you're a man. And for that, I had to open my pants. I never did it. It was during my +2 extra class. And I was, like, very shy. I used to go red. No, no. I mean, I used to, like, you know, keep quiet. Right now, I'm connected to her. And it was very homophobic by that time. But now I see she shares some pictures about LGBTQ. Sometimes, maybe, like, Nepal legalized same-sex marriage. She shared that on her Instagram. So, I'm like: "Okay, change is happening." And if I see her, I'm like: "Hi, how's it going?" That's it. But, like, I remember, it's not like I forget. I don't forget, but I don't hold grudges. I'm like: "Okay, I'll talk if I have to." I'm connected on Instagram. I wish her happy birthday. Like, not just her, but everyone.

I: Yeah, yeah. Just, like, keep the people around you that treat you well and you feel comfortable with. So, yeah, that makes sense.

Yeah, I sometimes feel like it's also kind of a trend that people who used to be queerphobic, homophobic years ago are now, like, sharing stuff on social media because everyone is doing so.

B: Not just everyone is doing so, but, like, with time, it is, their perception has also changed.

I: Yeah.

B: I mean, it's both of them.

I: Yeah. Yes. So, next...

B: Are you getting what you're looking for?

I: Yes.

B: Because sometimes when I talk to people, I mean, it's like, it doesn't have to be certain way, but, like, I don't get what I was looking for, but it's, like, it just passes. Are you getting what you're looking for?

I: Yes. The thing is, I don't know, you know grounded theory, do you?

B: Grounded theory, I do.

I: Yeah. So, like, I use grounded theory, so I don't, like, have any hypothesis now. So, I do my interviews first and then I form, like, my hypothesis.

B: Oh, okay.

I: So, right now, like, everything is basically good for my research and that's why.

B: Yeah. Grounded theory, I mean, of course, it makes sense.

I: Yes.

00:20:58

I: So, when you felt, like, your first attraction and realized: "Okay, my gender, my sexual orientation is not heteronormative", did you already open up to someone during your early...

B: Never.

I: Okay.

B: I'll tell you one thing. In my grade 9, I made a girlfriend because everyone were making, everyone were, like, you know, hooking up with opposite sex. Yeah. I had to do it just to prove them that I'm not queer.

I: Yeah.

B: I mean, they didn't know that I'm queer, but that time people only knew transgender. That's it. It's... So, I had to prove them that I'm not transgender women, so that's why I made a fake girlfriend. I never talked to her in person.

I: Yeah.

B: We used to study at the same class, same classroom. Sometimes, we're, like, smiling, giving chocolates and, like: "Thank you, bye." That's it. Online, we used to talk a lot. We broke up and, again, I made another girlfriend for one, two years. We just chatted a lot, talked on the phone, but I never met because she was so used to Kathmandu, I used to live in Bhairahawa. During lockdown, we were talking. She was, like: "Binod, I wish we were together." I said, "I really wish that, too. And I have to tell you something." She's, like: "Okay, please, yeah, tell me. Why can't we be together?" She was in Australia by that time. I told her, I was, like, taking pause. She was, like: "Please don't tell that you are gay." I said – I took a pause for, like, good 15 seconds.

I: Yeah.

B: "I am." That's what, that's how I, that's how I said her, like, she's, like: "Oh, my God. Oh, really? I mean, don't worry about anything." So, the conversation, we talked for, like, straight eight or to ten hours. I was not expecting her to be that supportive. We still talk.

I: That's nice to hear. I get goosebumps right now.

B: I was, like, not expecting, and I told her: "I'm so sorry." I mean, I don't think I'm gay, but, like, you know, but that time, I thought I was gay. So, yeah, and she was, like, very supportive. She mentioned that I think I'm, I think I'm, like, you know, I was attracted to girls. That's what I think, but I'm not sure. That's what she said, and yes, she's very supportive to me.

I: That's nice to hear.

B: So, it's, like, I don't want to lose people. I told her, I'm people pleaser as well. So, it's, like, I don't want to hate anyone. Even the first girlfriend, we're still good friends. Not good friends, just friends. We congratulate each other. She's, like: "Oh, you came back to Nepal? Okay, eat everything you want to eat."

I: Yeah.

B: Like: "Okay, thank you. I'll eat" (laughs).

I: Yeah.

B: (Laughs).

00:24:06

B: I have a question to you. Do you sometimes feel you get connected to other people? Like, you know, when you interview people, you ask about so many things, and naturally, you feel more connected.

I: Yes.

B: I guess I'm, like, I'm interviewing people, and I'm becoming friends with them at the same time.

I: Yes, that's happened.

B: Yeah.

I: To, like, two persons I just, like, interviewed last week, and I feel like it's happening right now again.

B: (Laughs).

I: So, yes.

B: I don't feel like I'm interviewing someone. I mean, of course, I'm at this field, but, like, not because of that. I'm, like, you know, I'll just talk more.

I: Yeah, for me, I mean, I shouldn't, like, say that as an anthropologist who actually has to draw a line.

B: Exactly (laughs).

I: But for me, on a personal level, it's also about connection, and I like to connect with people and feel comfortable around people.

B: But this is a thing with humanity. So, if you, like, keep anthropology aside, you see humanity, and it's, like, getting connected to each other.

I: Yeah.

B: So, like, chill.

I: Yeah. So, yeah. Should I continue?

B: Definitely.

00:25:26

I: So, during your childhood and teenage years, were there any societal family expectations or values that were, like, put on you, and also was, like, marriage a topic already in your family?

B: It's literally the same question I have. Yes, of course. So, I used to do my household chores, like cleaning. Maybe there was a point, I visited a psychiatrist. He said: "You have an OCD." I don't think I do, but then, you know, but then I used to clean a lot. Because of that, my family, friends, family specifically used to say: "Oh, your wife's gonna be super lucky because you work a lot. You can do household. Your wife's gonna be very lucky" – something like that. And people used to consider me good-looking, and because of that, they were, like: "For Binod, it's tough to find a girl who is as good-looking as he is." People used to say that a lot, and I was, like, I mean, I used to get happy: "Okay, they're thinking, like, I look good." But at the same time, like: "Okay, I'm not getting married to a woman." But sometimes I feel like I might. But when they comment on me, and I wish I could tell them that I'm not getting married to a woman. So, they had, they still have an expectation. So, they don't, my parents still don't know that I'm queer.

I: They don't know?

B: They don't know. None of, like, only there are, like, five, six people. So, there are only five, six people who know that I'm queer, except people know it from different community, but not my family. They know trans people, how it works, how their life is. They're do research on this. Let's make their life better. I introduce them what does being gay and bisexual mean, like, and they're like: "Is it true? Like, does it happen in Nepal as well? Is it? I thought it's just a western thing." Like, no, no, no, that's what I'm researching. I mean, my parents literally know my research, but they still don't know their child is queer. So, my mom was, like, by the time she was 30, 32, you can get married, and last week she told me that find a good girl in the States who is also Nepali, because you know her, that way you get to know her better.

00:28:00

B: But my brother used to live in Australia for seven years. When he came back, he told me that: "Okay, now you are going to the States. Okay. You are going to the States. I always know that you are kind of different. So, love whoever you feel like you love." That was the time I sensed that, okay, my brother know that I'm queer. So, maybe because that's what he was referring to. So...

I: But, like, you never actively stated that in front of your brother, or did you?

B: Never what?

I: Like, stated that you are queer.

B: To my brother?

I: Yeah.

B: No, no, never.

I: Okay. Okay, but you just sensed that he was feeling.

B: Yeah, because we were drinking a night before my flight to the States. He's like: "Do live your life. Now it's your turn." I leave now. So, he came back to Nepal permanently. And like, at night, my brother, go. I was like, crying. It's night, we're drinking on, you know, terrace. I was like, okay.

00:29:05

I: So, why are you not opening up in front of your family?

B: Yes. So, I also don't know the reason why I'm not opening with my family. I don't have to tell him that I'm queer right now. Because it doesn't gonna, it's not gonna impact anything. Still being a student of sexuality studies, you know, like, okay. Still, I'm like, training my parents slowly, slowly, slowly. I asked my mom last week that: "If I change myself, like, basically, if I change myself, would you still gonna love me?" "So, like, why not? You are my star." So, I'm telling my parents slowly, slowly. I also don't know if I'm going to get married to a woman or a man. Because as I mentioned earlier, I'm not gay. So, I'm like queer. So, I feel, there is a thing, I feel romantically attracted to women. Sexually toward some men. Sexually toward, like, women but on just aside – do you know what I mean? Are you getting me?

I: Yes, I understand.

B: Like women just aside with men more than that.

I: Yeah.

B: But romantically, I know romantic just women.

I: Yeah.

B: And I have not figured out the proper term for this. So, there is a thing like people...

I: I mean like you don't always have to name everything...

B: Exactly, exactly.

I: And like put you in like a category. So...

B: So, I'm like chill. So, that's the reason why I'm not like – I mean, they never asked me. My brother never told them that he's straight. But, I mean, I'm thinking that with my parents, with my best friend, yeah, I told them. But with my parents, I don't know. I mean, I'm not living with them anymore. So, I will, definitely. I should, with time. So, that whenever people say something to them, they don't feel hesitated with their son's identity or orientation. So that's the reason of me not confronting to my parents.

00:31:51

I: Do you feel more free in the US? Like being queer?

B: No.

I: No?

B: There is a thing. Alright, so I told you I am writing a book on this, book chapter. So, there are a few things that I am not mentioning because I already finalized my draft. It's going to be literally the same thing here and there. And I don't want to do that, but I'll tell you briefly. And it's very important for your research that you are doing.

(...)

B: So, while we were talking – I want to tell you something. It's very important for the research you do. With Nepali there is a weird feeling when they migrate to other countries. It's just like they want to be more surrounded with Nepali people only. Because they have similar culture and it's because they can speak the same language, same food. There is a weaving in-between them. When I moved to the States, I told myself that I'm not going to hesitate if people ask me if I'm queer. I'm like: "Yes, I am a queer." But after moving there, I chose my roommate Nepali. I have more Nepali friends. Because of that, here in Nepal, I was a student of social science

which means I have more people who do social science. Which means they are more nice to me. I don't have to worry a lot. You know, more grounded people, I'd say. There, it's mixed. I am the only student who does non-esteem course. Not even gender, like non-esteem course. All of them belong to engineering, like IT, this subject. And they don't know, they have very less knowledge about LGBTIQ+. Because of that, I have more Nepali friends who belong to various backgrounds, who are homophobic, who don't have any knowledge regarding social science. Because of that, I feel like I'm stuck with people. When I come to Nepal, I have friends who do social science. And they don't question my femininity, nothing at all. But there, it's like, I have to maintain it. Sometimes it comes a point where I'm like, I wish I could tell them. But since I'm living with them, I don't want to deal with the hatred that may come to me. And I cannot change my room immediately. I wanted to change my room immediately, but because of the lease thing. I cannot sublease it. We had an agreement, so I have to stay with them. So, because of that, I don't feel more freedom over there. I feel more free over here. Because people know how I am here. If I wear anything more feminine, my brother is not going to question me. But there, I'm stuck with more people who don't have much ideas about these topics. So, I feel like: "What the hell is going on here?" Because I am picking more Nepali people to stay with me, to have friends. Because of that, I don't feel more comfortable or more free.

I: And expressing yourself.

B: Exactly.

I: Okay, I see.

B: As a result, I talk a lot about gender issues with them. I can literally see that they are changing a lot. They were homophobic. They were homophobic AF. They are less homophobic right now. And I really want to stay with them. I signed my lease for next year. It's going to create an impact in their life. We live four people together. Now, they are like: "Oh Binod, we saw one person. And we think the person belongs to LGBT" – in a nicer way. Like, okay, you don't have to assume it. Just be okay. And when they see events happening in the university, regarding queer community, they are like: "Oh Binod, do you know there is an event happening in the university?" I don't want, in the future, if they have a child, if the child is queer, at least because of me, it's going to impact their children. Or at least the community. So, I signed my lease again. And I am teaching them about. I sometimes, in a month, when we have a conversation, they even ask me: "What is it? What's the meaning of bisexual?" And I teach them. And it's just been a year I'm living with them. Within a year, I can feel the change. They went to watch a

Hindi movie. My roommate came home, and he was telling his other friend on the phone, he found the particular Hindi film more sexist and misogynist. And I was like, okay, this person talks about this thing right now. Later on, when we were drinking, I told you, I was not expecting... I call him bro. I was not expecting you thinking this way. All credit goes to him. I'm like: "Okay, that's great." And he's like: "You are going on field research to your country. It's a great thing, do great." So, I can literally see the change. However, there are a lot... I mean, it's a long way to go, but it's still creating an impact from an individual at least to three, four people.

I: I mean, you are the person who is starting it, impacting three, four people, who might be impacting even more people. So, this is how things are spreading.

B: Sometimes I feel like I'm doing it well.

I: Seems like.

B: My professor told me, not my own professor, one professor from the university, when I shared her this, she was like: "Cut off them." I gave it a thought. I am not going to cut off people who are not very nice to me regarding sexuality. Rather, I'll try to figure it out, why is it happening? And I'm going to teach them. And this is going to help them to learn at least. If they are way toxic, then of course, yes. But if it's bearable, then I'm not going to cut off them. Rather, I'm going to teach them. And it's really, I can see the change. And I feel like most of the Americans are more individualistic. It's completely different here in Nepal. And we idealize American thoughts or Western thoughts a lot. So, I'm like: Okay, I'm not going to think the Western part of boycotting whoever hits you, living your own life, living alone." I cannot do that. So, for that, I want to live with people. And the problem is on people that they are not familiar with queerness and everything. But rather, I can initiate a conversation. I can talk to them. I can teach about gender issues and everything. So, they used to call for something which is feminine: "Oh, this is like a girl!" They used to say this a lot. But right now, they don't say anything. Sometimes they feel like: "Oh, this is so girly. Oh, no, no, I'm so sorry." They do it right now.

I: Okay.

B: (Laughs).

I: So, like the clear boundary they had is slowly blurring?

B: Yeah! Yes, exactly. And I can literally see it.

I: That's nice. I'm happy to hear that. That you're impacting them. That's good.

B: We went together on the same flight. We were connected on a Facebook group. And then we met in person. And then we went.

I: Okay. So, you went all to the same flight to the U.S. or same flight back this time to Nepal?

B: Same flight to the U.S. They are doing their PhD. They are STEM students, which means boring Life, working at Lab 24/7 (laughs).

00:41:41

I: May I ask where in the U.S. you live?

B: Ohio. It's University of Cincinnati.

I: Okay.

B: And it's the second oldest university to have a course in women, gender, and sexuality studies. It was founded in 1800-something.

I: Okay, wow, that's a long time ago.

B: Women's studies, later on they changed it to gender and sexuality. It was introduced as women's studies.

I: Interesting, interesting, I've never heard of this before.

B: And I teach a subject called human sexuality for undergrad students. And there are 450 undergrad students.

I: Wow. That's a good number, right?

B: I don't do it alone. I have a professor. I am her teaching assistant. Sometimes I take classes. It's fun.

(...)

Participant Dhirendra

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview IDs: I4_Dhirendra_20240714_IA1; I4_Dhirendra_20240714_IA2

Interviewee: Dhirendra, male, age 25

Duration IA1: 00:20:38

Duration IA2: 00:14:05

Location, Time: Utpala Café, Boudha, Kathmandu, 14.07.2024 at 7.30 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Dhirendra's residence: Lalitpur, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Artist, German Student, Art and Program Manager

Introduction: I also got to know Dhirendra through Neha from jhomedia. After meeting her at the end of June and explaining my research project to her, she reached out to people who might be interested in participating in my research project and/or could provide further contacts. This led her to contact Dhirendra, who is/was active with Queer Youth Group Nepal (a non-profit organization that works with and supports queer Nepali youth).

Initial contact: I contacted Dhirendra via WhatsApp, and we had a brief phone call on the morning of June 30, 2024, during which I explained the project in more detail. He said he would think about participating for a bit. Coincidentally, I met him later that same day at a networking event ("Queering the Bond") in Bhasantapur. By chance, we ended up sitting next to each other, exchanged a few words, and then realized we had already spoken in the morning. We had a relaxed conversation about mutual interests, his new job as a curator at a museum, and the fact that we both had lived in Berlin. This conversation helped build a certain level of trust, as he eventually agreed to participate in my project the same day.

Scheduling the Interview: A week after our spontaneous meeting, Dhirendra messaged me and suggested a meeting in July 14m 2024, at Utpala Café in Boudha, which is close to his work place, at 6.30 pm. Utpala Café is a restaurant run by Buddhist monks, offering only vegetarian/vegan cuisine. The atmosphere is very pleasant.

Meeting at Utpala: When I arrived, Dhirendra was already there, working on his laptop. He closed it when he saw me, stood up, and greeted me with a hug. The greeting felt friendly and warm. We sat down again, outside under a covered area in the garden. Initially, we were seated across from each other. There were a few occupied tables around us.

Initial Conversation: We started with a casual conversation about his day at the museum and how his work was going in general. I then asked about his German course. Afterwards, he inquired about the project and how we should proceed. I gave him the consent form, and he said he still needed to decide whether he wanted to remain anonymous or not, so he hadn't signed it yet.

Interview Process: I explained to him that the interview sessions were divided into three parts (Childhood, Adolescence/School, Adulthood/Coming Out) and outlined the topics we would cover. He asked if we could start right away. However, a large group of people arrived and sat next to our table, making it noisy, so we moved to a quieter spot in the garden.

Starting the Interview: We ordered drinks and a portion of Mo:Mo to share. I briefly introduced myself and the project again, explained the interview process, and asked him to introduce himself and talk about his childhood. He spoke for about 20 minutes. We then took a break to eat our Mo:Mo while continuing to chat casually. Afterwards, we discussed his school days, and he talked for about 15 minutes. These two interview segments are IA1 and IA2.

Photo Documentation: I also gave him a camera, explained how it worked, and what kind of photos he could take. He happily accepted it and said he was excited to try analogue photography.

Conclusion: As it was getting late, around 8.30 pm, he mentioned that he needed to head home. I paid the bill, and we both ordered rides home. We left the restaurant and said goodbye with a hug. We will arrange another meeting via WhatsApp.

Transcript 1.1

Date: 14.07.2024

Duration: 00:19:49

Interviewee: Dhirendra

Audio File: I4_Dhirendra_20240714_IA1

I: MS

D: Dhirendra

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00:00:00

I: And, yes, and I would ask you to introduce yourself, tell me your name, age, pronouns, sexual orientation if you like, where you live and how you live in your occupation first, and then we continue, okay?

D: Okay. So, hi, my name is Dhirendra and I'm 25 years old. My pronouns are he or they. I go by both. And my sexual orientation is I like men, that means I'm gay. And I live in Bhaiseapati, so it's one of the places inside Kathmandu Valley. I live with my family, four members in my family. I'm the youngest one. I have a sister, mom and dad. And occupation-wise, I'm working as art and program coordinator at one of the art spaces in Kathmandu.

00:01:03

I: Okay. So, can you take me through your childhood? Where did you grow up? How was your childhood like? Who did you spend time with, like, whatever you remember from your childhood days.

D: So, as a child, I actually was a very introverted child, and I didn't used to talk much. I was a very quiet one. And I didn't used to share and open up, didn't really feel comfortable doing that, even with my friends. I used to be one of the quietest in the class as well, but in terms of studies, I was good. And as a child, I really liked arts in terms of, like, I really liked dancing. So, I used to dance to different songs that used to be played on the TV, and I just liked the dance because it just used to make me feel free and I just used to feel like I didn't have anything, you know, like any stress in my life. Not that you have a lot of stress in your childhood, but still, it just used to feel that way, as if I'm free and that I don't have to care about anything, you know, as a child. So, that's that. And childhood for me was, I don't know, not as much fun as people would sometimes talk about their childhood. I don't have such memories about my childhood. I mean, there are certain aspects of my childhood that I can remember vividly and that I want to remember. But certain parts of my childhood are kind of triggering sometimes when I think about it, especially when it comes to me expressing myself as I told you, that I really like dancing and the form of dance that I used to do was considered kind of feminine. So, some of the moves that I would do would trigger, some of the people would not want to, you know, just see me expressing in ways that would be considered feminine. So, in that regard, something that I used to like very much, that is dancing, I had to quit completely. So that's something that I feel sad about. But still, these days I really liked doing what I used to like doing, that is

dancing. Not that I'm saying that I'm very good at it, but still, the dance form itself, it just makes me happy, just moving your body and just vibing with the music. It's a different feeling.

00:03:37

D: And what else about the childhood? So, in terms of my family, as I told you, I was a very quiet child, but I was good at studies and my parents would always expect me to do good at studies. I mean, I think every Asian parent would want their child to be that way. But there was so much control, I feel, in terms of going about your children. Like, there was freedom on some level, but it just used to pressure you into studying all the time, which I feel was not the right thing to do. And also, because I have a huge age difference with my father, 50 years age gap, which is a lot, I think. So that way as well, I think as a child as well, it was very difficult for me to form that relationship that a son and a father has. You know? I still struggle with that, I don't know. Something about it doesn't work with my father. With mum, there's some level of comfort that I have in terms of sharing what I want to share, but with my father it's kind of difficult. I don't know what that is, but our opinions and how we see life itself is very different.

I: Are you close to your sibling?

D: I would not call it close, I guess. I would say I don't have a very close relationship, but our relationship is working fine. We don't share everything, but we do talk. Just small talks, yeah. I mean, I would expect more, for sure, and that's on me sometimes to initiate as well, but it never was like that, you know, being very open. There are moments, there used to be moments when I used to be very open about what was going on and all that. I mean, I still am, but I don't know, maybe I'm expecting more from my sibling to share everything, what's going on in my life, and for her to share everything in her life as well. Maybe, yeah.

00:06:17

I: Can I come back to the dancing part?

D: Yeah.

I: Were they also making or complaining about you dancing or doing like a feminine dance? Or did your parents complain, or like other relatives, neighbors, when you were a child?

D: My parents were fine with that. They just actually used to think it was fun to see me dance, but it was one of my relatives, and also my friends thinking something else wasn't a problem,

but it was more the relatives, because that was then passed down, that comment was then passed down to my family, and then I just realized that maybe I should completely stop this. But when it comes to my school days, I actually used to even dance, go in front of the class and just dance in a particular song, and I think most of my friends were okay with that, and even my teachers used to have fun, you know, like seeing me dance and stuff like that. I mean, there definitely used to be a couple of my friends who used to pass on comments, like saying that, you know, that's so gay and stuff like that, and mostly you would, when you are a child, relate that as an insult, as something very negative, which I now realize it's not. It's just a sexual orientation, that is. But during that time, I actually heard the word gay itself from my friends, and then I came to know about what that meant by saying that it was not like a revelation to me that I was gay at the time, but just that awareness or just coming to know that word was when that was being commented on me by a few of my friends. But that comment, as I said earlier, that was being made by one of my relatives was kind of discouraging because, you know, it's just you expressing yourself. You're just simply dancing, and it doesn't have to be gendered in any way, but just the moves that I used to do was kind of labeled as something feminine, and maybe I would have explored that more, and maybe now I would have been a dancer. I don't know. It's just something that I feel I might have been, but I don't know. That was kind of discouraging, and I wish that didn't have happened.

I: I see.

00:08:42

I: And may I ask, like do you remember who was doing the caregiving when you grew up, and who was the breadwinner?

D: Actually, both of my parents used to work, both my mom and dad, but caregiving in terms of someone who works in the kitchen, prepares food and all, was being done by my mother herself. But since I was a child, I was kind of taught and always knew somehow that it's not always my mom's or my sister's job to do a certain task that's considered feminine. So, going back to the question, it was mostly my mother who did the caring part in terms of cooking food, washing dishes, or, you know, like washing the clothes and all. And my father used to work as well, but was not as involved as my mother was in terms of cooking and household tasks.

I: May I ask what your siblings are doing?

D: Right now?

I: Yeah.

D: I have one sibling, and she is currently working at a college as an admin.

I: Okay.

D: Yeah. And I actually have two mothers. My father married two women, and the mom that I have, my own mom, she's the second one, and there's like the first one, with whom I am in a good, okay relationship, but we are kind of distant in terms of location-wise because they have a separate family as well who lives outside Nepal. Not Nepal, sorry, outside Kathmandu.

I: But are they, like... Is your father still married to both? Or is he divorced?

D: No, he's already divorced.

I: Okay.

D: He's already divorced, yeah. But we still, I still call her mom because it's not that we have stopped the connection or the relationship. We do meet and like celebrate festivals, sometimes together, not all the time, especially during Dashain, we go there and celebrate.

I: Okay.

D: Yeah.

00:11:17

I: And what were your parents' occupations when you were a child? Like, what were they working for or at?

D: My mother, she used to work, I mean, she's now working or...?

I: Back then.

D: Oh, back then. She used to work at telecommunications, yeah, and my father used to work in the Department of Construction.

I: Okay. I see.

00:11:50

I: So, anything else that comes to your mind when thinking about your childhood? So, do you remember, like, specific kind of other heteronormative gender roles?

D: Yeah.

I: Like, your male friends always played outside...

D: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

I: ...soccer and... Was it like that?

D: Yeah, it was actually like that as well. You know what, I actually used to feel as a child that if I played game, if I played any kind of games, then I was a bad student or something. I don't know why. Now that I think about it, it feels so funny, because not just me, there used to be a couple of friends or maybe more who used to stay in the classroom reading or going to the library during the breaks or during the lunch break, you know? And I used to play sometimes, but not as much as other male friends used to play. But I used to like playing, but at the same time, I used to think that, you know, if I played, then this particular teacher would think that I'm a bad student. I don't know. It's just so funny and strange now that I think about it.

And, yeah, that was something that was going on, and I actually used to participate in a lot of different, like, you know, school events, like spelling competitions and, like, sometimes debates as well and quiz competitions. I really liked these kinds of events, like educational ones mostly, but I also liked to dance and, yeah. And some, you know, I used to like to go to dance classes as well, but sometimes what used to happen was that it used to be so gendered, even the dance classes. So, mostly there used to be, like, girls, you know, participating in the dance classes, and there used to be very few men or, like, boys. And, again, there used to be this conversation that if you go in dance classes, then you're, like, you know, like a girl or you're gay or something like that. And that used to be discouraging, but still, like, I used to go dancing sometimes. So, that used to be fun. And I really like to be creative. When I was a child, I used to write certain lyrics of a song. Even if I don't sing anything, I really like to, you know, write a secret song or something like that. Once I wrote a song about nationality and nationalism and stuff like that. And, yeah, it was really fun.

00:14:35

D: But, I don't know, but about my attraction-wise, it's not that after puberty that things were clear to me. Even when I was a child, I could sense that I was a little bit different than my

friends in terms of what I used to like, what I used to, you know, share with my friends. And, for example, when you're watching a TV, then you like the guy more than a girl in terms of attraction, or maybe not just attraction, but something. I mean, I like both in terms of, like, both aspects. But, as a child, I don't know, there was something about me that used to feel like, okay, although it's like me boxing myself, but when I was a child, I used to think, like, you know, I'm a girl or something like that. There was one point in my life when that's something I used to feel. And, yeah, it was kind of funny. But, I remember one time, like, when one of my teachers was teaching this subject called health and population. We used to call it HP. And there was this chapter about STIs and, like, you know, diseases, sexually transmitted diseases. And, you know, how he started the class was kind of strange, now that I think about it, he was, like, you know, talking about how AIDS was, like, you know, a thing. And he was just talking about, like, when a man had sexual intercourse with a chimpanzee and stuff like that. Until that, he used to feel it was okay. And, like, you know, that was a thing. But when he said, like, you know, I hope none of you here is gay or, like, something like this because that is bad. When he said that, I already had in mind that, okay, so being gay or anything outside being straight is a bad thing. I already had that thing ingrained on my mind.

So, I always used to have that fear when I used to see that word gay itself. You know, it used to feel something very negative and something not to be, you know, spelled out or something that you cannot talk about, really. So, in that way, it used to feel really, you know, uncomfortable as well when I was a child.

00:16:58

D: And, again, we can talk about the portrayal of queer characters on television and media as well. Although we're Nepalese people, but we were very much influenced by Bollywood, like Hindi movies since when I was a child. So, at that time, Bollywood characters were portrayed in very negative ways. Like, they used to be portrayed just as a fun material in media, in a film. So, they used to be, you know, their character used to be very exaggerated in terms of their appearance and the way they used to talk, their gestures and everything else. And people used to take it as a reference to judge you if you were something outside, maybe if you're behaving something outside the binary, for example. So, if you're a guy, if you're kind of feminine, then they used to label you as something, you know. And, yeah, it used to be difficult that way. But still, I didn't have really in my mind that it was that scary and that, you know, like, that would give you such uncomfortable feeling for such a long time.

I: Yeah, I watched Dostana a couple of weeks back. I don't know if you remember this.

D: Dostana, it's the...

I: The one in Miami.

D: Yeah, yeah. Two guys pretending to be gay to get a girl.

I: It's so bad.

D: Yeah.

I: It's so bad.

D: Yeah.

I: Like, they switch all of a sudden, their whole appearance, their character.

D: It's such a bad representation.

I: Yeah, it's not like that. And then the question arises, either you want representation at all or, like, bad representation. Because, like, in those old Bollywood movies or, like, older Bollywood movies from the 2000 years, like, the representation is so bad. So, wouldn't it be better to have actually no representation again?

D: Exactly.

I: Like, this question arose.

D: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I: So, because stereotypes then are getting spread.

D: Yeah, yeah.

I: And this is not the right way to make people aware.

D: There are so many problematic things around it.

I: Yes, yes. But, I mean, it's the same issue with Hollywood movies. Like, old Hollywood movies are, like, the same.

(...)

Transcript 1.2

Date: 14.07.2024

Duration: 00:14:04

Interviewee: Dhirendra

Audio File: I4_Dhirendra_20240714_IA2

I: MS

D: Dhirendra

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00:00:00 Coming out in front of (half-)sisters

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00:08:21 Freedom/personal space vs. family and societal expectations

-

00:00:00

D: When it comes to my awareness, when I was a child, maybe when I was like studying in grade 10, and my sister used to work at that time. The age difference between me and my sister is just two years. And sometimes when my sister used to come from work, she used to, like, not always, but once or twice, she mentioned that when she used to come from this particular place called Kaushala, she used to see, like, gay people, or trans people, she used to mention that, you know, not in a positive way, in a negative way. And I again used to think that, you know, being queer is, like, a bad thing, and stuff like that. And when I was, like, in grade 10 things were slowly beginning to be clear to me, I mean, not exactly, but I used to get a sense of me being different more and more, and trying to figure out who I really am, in terms of my identity, only that. And when my sister used to tell me that, I never thought that I would be able to, you know, tell about my queerness to my sister. But then I finally did. When I was maybe 19, after my high school, I told her about my queerness, because...

I: Was she the first person?

D: She's not the first person, actually. You know, I told you about my other mom, so, like, the, I don't know how to say it, another mom, not my own mom. So, she has two children as well, a son and a daughter, and I first came out to my other sister, the elder one.

I: So, like your half-sister?

D: Yeah, half-sister. And I came out to her because I was going through some heartbreak issues, and I really needed to vent to someone. And while we were having breakfast in the morning, it was really difficult for me to just keep it to myself about a bad breakup that I had recently, and then I just bursted out, you know? And then I revealed her about my attraction towards guys. And then at that time to one particular guy that I was in a relationship with and that was that. And the funny thing is this conversation, I mean, me expressing about that attraction, happened in a closed room with me and my sister. And we were, I was just hugging my sister, and she was just, you know, like, telling me that it's okay. And she was also mentioning that she also has some friends who are gay, and that's nothing to worry about, it's fine, and stuff like that.

I: How old were you?

D: I think I was, like, 18? 18, I think. And then the thing, what happened was that my parents knew about my relationship with someone, but then the thing is, my sister told my parents that the relationship that I had was with a girl, not a boy. So, my parents have that idea already, and maybe that's also one of the reasons why I still think that I'm straight, because my sister has told them that I had a relationship with a girl. And it was a very dramatic one, because I was crying in a closed room, and stuff like that (laughs). So, yeah, that was funny.

00:03:44

I: So, you never, like, actually told your parents?

D: It's funny, because I used to give them clues. For example, when they used to talk about marriage, I used to tell them – like I told you earlier, that I'm very different from my parents in the sense that I have different ideologies in terms of like, living, and like, in different topics, it was vast different, and still is – I used to give them sense about my queerness by telling them that I'm not someone who likes the idea of marriage and like, only debating things around marriage. And I also used to sometimes tell them that, what if I like a boy, you know? And they just used to think that it's a joke. They were in denial. I mean, they're still in denial, but they

just used to think that I'm joking. Yeah, they still think that way, that I'm joking. I don't know, and they'll be serious about it, but, yeah.

I: How do you feel about it, is it okay like this?

D: It's going fine as of now, but I think there will come a time when I really have to tell them. I mean, I've been telling them, but when they will really have to believe that, you know? And I don't feel like rushing at this time, there used to be times I think, I cannot tell exactly when, but I think almost after my high school, I used to, you know, encourage them to watch videos that talk about queerness, like stories. I feel like storytelling is very powerful. That's why I used to sometimes show them documentaries, you know, about queer relationships. There was one specific story or experience of two women in their 40s falling in love. First like, you know, having that bond as a friend, and then that slowly building up as a relationship. And that was quite interesting, and I tried to show that, but I think my mother didn't get it, actually. Maybe she still thought that they were like friends. But these things that I used to do like, you know, very intentionally, I really want to show them these kinds of movies and documentaries, but that didn't work out very well. I mean, I tried.

00:06:14

D: And I also sometimes used to, you know, like express my feminine side, for example, one step at a time, for example wearing earrings, so that they get a sense that, you know, that I'm not that typical, stereotypical, you know, guy. That I'm beyond that as well. And that was very intentional of me, because I wanted to give them that sense. And these days as well, I always have like, a little bit of make-up with me wherever I go, it's always on my bag. I mean, I wouldn't consider that make-up, make-up per se, but for example, some lotion, some sunscreen, and eye-shadow that I always have in my bag. And sometimes when mom sees it and she asks me: "Why do you have this in your bag?" And then I just tell her: "I like it!" And she doesn't say anything.

I: Okay.

D: Because she's kind of used to it (laughs).

00:07:09

I: Yeah, so and like, what if you are in a relationship again? Or are you in a relationship, if I may ask?

D: Right now? I'm not in a relationship right now.

I: So, I mean, you would like only meet outside, and not bring the person to your parents' place?

D: Never, I don't know if I'd ever do that, I mean, I would love to, for them to see my partner, and introduce, show him around, show them around where I live, where my parents are. But, I don't know, it's a very difficult thing (laughs). Yeah, let alone having a conversation about this topic, bringing in my boyfriend would be something else. But something I wish I could do without feeling scared or nervous.

I: Do you think this could happen at some point in the future?

D: I think so. I think with time, things change.

00:08:21

D: And I feel like as you grow up you experience some kind of power. There's a fluctuation of power dynamics. I don't mean that in a negative sense, but you have some sort of control, right? And I don't mean to say that I control my parents, but just in terms of you growing up, you have that independence and more freedom. And that I think that can happen someday in the future because I feel like that would be needed as well because it's a big part of who I am as well. Even if that's not the thing that I express all the time, but that's a big part of who I am. It's something that I don't think I can avoid all my life (giggles). But I feel like I have to actually be away from my family for some time because I've been very attached to my family, and my family is also very attached to me. It's a good thing, but at the same time personal space is very important to me. And to see the world and to meet new people is also very important to me. And when I'm so around my parents all the time, my family all the time I feel like growth sometimes stops and it's kind of slow when that happens. And a lot of times Nepali parents think that when you are living separately from your parents, they would take it in a negative way. They would think that you don't love your parents anymore, but that's not really the case. You just want to grow as a person because you want to really learn things. I feel like the love would be more, the bonding would be more stronger assuming if you are living separately from your parents.

I: Oh.

D: It's a flying cockroach.

I: Yeah, a cockroach.

D: It shouldn't come here come (laughs).

I: Go away.

D: Okay.

I: You can have that! I think it's yours, I ate one more, I think. Or I mean, if you're full, you don't have to.

D: We can share if you want?

I: Okay. Do you know that it's actually the opposite in like German countries or German speaking countries, that if you still live with your parents in your 20s, people say that you have done something wrong to the parents. Like why is your child still living with you? Something is going on in your family.

D: I know, right? (laughs).

I: So, it's like the complete opposite.

D: Exactly!

I: My brother moved out when he was 23 and people were asking: "Why is he still living with you? This is so unusual!" And I mean, I moved out directly after I finished high school. Two weeks after, I was gone! This is quite normal.

D: Exactly. But it's not normal here. I mean, they would take it not as a big deal, if you are living with your parents outside Kathmandu valley and then you come to Kathmandu valley for education and stuff like that. The case is different. But if you are living in Kathmandu valley and your parents also live in the same place but you're just living in different places inside the valley, then they would just take it negatively. And also the society, they would gossip (laughs).

I: Yes, I can imagine.

D: I wish that wasn't the case.

I: Very different.

D: I mean, living separately comes with challenges but it's very important as well for you to grow as a person. Especially in terms of meeting new people and just doing the things that you like doing. There is so much control sometimes, even when you are an adult.

I: Also fully expressing yourself is also easier if you don't have anyone else around...

D: True, true.

I:...who always has an eye on you.

D: Yeah, yeah. That's true. So, it will be okay if you move out to another country when you're in Nepal that definitely wouldn't be an issue, because it's a new country. But when you are living separately in the same country or the same city then that would be questionable by the parents, the society. Although, that's important. Yeah, I think about my childhood, that's pretty much it. If there's anything I can share with you that's all I can think of.

I: I mean, if something comes to your mind you can share it with me, if you feel like it or also send me a voice message, we just talk about it the next time, we see each other. That's also an option.

(...)

Protocol 2

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I4_Dhirendra_20240801_IA3

Interviewee: Dhirendra, male, age 25

Duration: 00:55:46

Location, Time: Sky Park Restaurant, Bhaisepati, Lalitpur, 01.08.2024 at 8.00 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Dhirendra's residence: Lalitpur, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Artist, German Student, Art and Program Manager

Context: Our second meeting was arranged via WhatsApp. As with our previous meeting, I left the choice of date, time, and location up to Dhirendra. He opted for a location near his home in Bhaisepati, suggesting the Sky Park Restaurant. Although it was quite far and required a one-hour journey on my part, I agreed.

Arrival: I arrived at the restaurant at 7.25 pm. Dhirendra messaged me to let me know he would be a bit late and asked me to go ahead and find a seat for us. I selected a table by the huge window front of the restaurant, which offered a panoramic view of the city. The music was quite loud and the atmosphere very party-ish with many people talking loud, drinking alcohol and smoking hookah. Dhirendra was delayed further and arrived about 20 minutes later. Upon arrival, he greeted me warmly with a hug and apologized for his tardiness, explaining that his driver's motorbike had a flat tire, necessitating a stop at a repair shop. He sat down opposite from me.

Pre-Interview: We ordered drinks and a snack and engaged in casual conversation, discussing our week and daily experiences. The atmosphere was very friendly, relaxed and comfortable.

Interview Start: Once our food arrived, I asked if Dhirendra was ready to begin with the interview, to which he agreed. I started with a brief recap of our previous interview to set the context.

Interview Content: Dhirendra began by sharing detailed accounts of his youth, including the schools he went to, his family, friends, hobbies, and the moment he first realized his attraction to a male individual. The conversation lasted approximately one hour, gradually becoming more of a dialogue rather than a formal interview.

Post-Interview: After I stopped the audio recording, Dhirendra continued to share personal experience of sexual assault that occurred on a bus. He recounted standing in a crowded bus

with an elderly man behind him. Dhirendra initially thought the sensation he felt was caused by someone's bag, but he soon realized the older man was rubbing his genitals against him. Paralyzed with shock, Dhirendra was unable to react and was only relieved when he had to get off at his stop. He confided in a friend about the incident, but his friend merely laughed and didn't really offer any support. Shortly after this disclosure, our meeting came to an end as Dhirendra's family called, asking when he would return home. It was nearly 10 pm, and we were both tired from the day's events.

Conclusion: I paid the bill, and we left the restaurant together. Dhirendra waited with me until my driver arrived. We said our goodbyes with a hug, I thanked him for his time, and we agreed to stay in touch via WhatsApp.

Transcript 2

Date: 01.08.2024

Duration: 00:55:46

Interviewee: Dhirendra

Audio File: I4_Dhirendra_20240801_IA3

I: MS

D: Dhirendra

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00:51:28 Expressing identity on his terms

00:00:00

I: Okay. I hope it works.

D: Yeah, you can actually ask me questions.

I: Yeah. So, I listened to the last memo we've done. And you were talking about, like, why you... if you remember why you don't want to tell your parents and why you feel like you have more chances to express yourself living somewhere else. Like, moving out. So, this is what we talked, like, the last time.

D: Yeah.

I: And we talked about your childhood.

D: Yeah.

I: So, now I want to delve more into your school and teenage life. And could you just take me through your school days? Like, from class 1 to class 10 and then +2. Where did you go to school? What was it like? Your friends?

D: Yeah.

I: That would be nice.

D: Okay. So, I did my schooling in Kathmandu district. So, I was living with my parents, of course, at Maligaon. So, it's a place that's near Pashupatinath. So, I went to school in Maligaon and my school was a boarding school, but it was not so big. It was, like, small. But there were I think around, I don't know 300 to 400 total students. So, that was the school where I studied from my nursery to class 10. The same school where I did my open year education until my SLC. And in terms of my schooling experience, I was very much focused in my studies, I would say, as a student, because my sister was very good. So, sometimes there was this pressure that I have to, like, score good grades and be a good student and something like that. And I remember English always being my, you know, favorite subject and I used to like that subject because it had to do with stories and, like, language. And it used to feel like, you know, that was the class where you could express yourself in some ways. Like, I would say stories are a way of expression, right? So, in that way, when you listen to stories and when you read out stories, it used to feel good. And it used to take you to places where the characters have been. So, English was my favorite subject. And talking about other things, like, beyond studies, there used to be

extracurricular activities as well. I think I've mentioned in our last meeting that there didn't used to be a lot of extracurricular activities. There used to be art classes that used to be beginner-focused. And there was also karate, scout, and chorus dance and singing as well. So, dance and singing was something that I was interested in and I used to sit on those classes. And in those classes where there was expression happening, you know, you were expressing something, that was something that I really used to enjoy.

And, I don't know, like, I feel like, I mean, I still am, I was very introverted as a child, basically. And as a student as well, although I used to be, I wouldn't say very good, but still I was good enough in my studies. And then, at the same time, I was quiet. I used to participate in different programs and competitions and events, but at the same time, I used to be nervous and quiet.

And there used to be still someone like my English teacher who used to, like, you know, convince me and motivate me to do the things that I used to enjoy. Even when I was shy, she used to encourage me. And that was something that I used to really admire.

Yeah, and there was not, like, really a space, I would say, when it comes to specifically queerness, where I can, like, do things freely that I used to like to do. For example, I don't know what it's like in Germany, but in Nepali schools, girls and boys are placed in different seats, in different roles, basically. So, you know, that's not a problem, but just, you know, then categorizing, like, boys and girls was a thing then. And I feel like my conversations used to more align with girls than boys for some reason. So, I like to spend more time with girls and have conversations with them. But then that sometimes used to be seen as a negative thing or something, you know, like a shame or – I don't know the word – something that's kind of feminine, because you are actually sitting with girls. So, in that way, sometimes I just used to convince myself: “Okay, so I'm a boy, so I should actually do some sports and actually talk to boys and do the things that they generally do.”

And I feel like sometimes I used to have this feeling that I should kind of man up or say boy up, because that time you're really a boy. So just do the things that boys do, because there used to be moments when I used to feel like the things that I do are kind of girly. For example, maybe dance, although it's not, but when you're a kid, you think that way. So, sometimes I used to convince myself that, you know, I should change and stuff like that. And, yeah, but still, I didn't continue my dance class particularly that was being provided by school. But still, that was something that I really wanted to continue and do it, but then there used to be so less boys involved in it. So not really, not that boys have to be involved in that way, but because it used to be seen as something not really good. So that's why it was kind of discouraging that way.

And what else? So, I feel like because identity is so much important, your expression, so I feel like I was bottling my feelings quite a lot, especially because when you're hitting your puberty, you start liking people. And when my other friends used to express that to each other, you know, I used to feel like: "Oh, my God, I do not like anyone or maybe I like this guy. But I cannot tell my friends that because it's not OK, it's not right." Or something like that.

And it was around that time also I was, as I mentioned in my last interview that I was being introduced to the word gay by my friends as well. So, it always felt like an insulting word to me and not something that's positive. So, there were so many things going on in my mind.

And I feel like my grades or like my scores went down when I was like in my eighth or ninth grade, but that was a concern of my principal, definitely, but at that time, I myself was not very sure that that was that particular thing that was going on in my mind.

So, I just kept it to myself, and I just could not express anything. I mean, let alone my friends, I couldn't, I still cannot express that to my family or even some of my friends. So, yeah, that was just something that was bugging me.

But generally, I was introverted in such a way that I never went to my friend's house ever when I was in my school days or hang out with my friends apart from my school. So, I was that introverted or, I don't know, maybe shy or quiet that way. I'm not saying that's a problem, but still, as a kid, you would do all those things, you know. I mean, definitely I would play with my neighbors, my neighboring friends but the friends from my school, I would not go out with them after the school days or just limit that within the school boundaries. And I don't know, I just used to feel for some reason that it's so funny that if I played or did any kind of sport or did anything, any kind of expression, then I would be kind of like a bad student which feels funny now. So that's why I think it sort of limited me in some ways and I think it still has an impact on me until now, yeah.

00:10:32

I: Do you know when the perception you had about the word gay started to change?

D: To myself?

I: Yes.

D: Okay. I think it was after my +2. You know what, even when I was in grade 10, yeah, there's I think something beyond the school as well. So, I'll share with you. I had access of my mother's phone. And I think it was maybe when I was like in my grade seven or eight or maybe six as

well. I don't remember very well. That time I created my Facebook account. And around that time, my mom had this Nokia phone, which only runs with keypad, not the one with touchscreen. It still used to feel a lot because you could search things online. I never searched the word gay, but I used to search for guys and stuff like that, because honestly, at that time, you're exploring yourself. You're just getting to know yourself. So, you have that access. So, you just search for things that you have curiosity about. So that was something that I was doing. And it was getting a bit clear to me. But still, I think I was just not thinking about it or maybe just trying to ignore the fact that I could be gay.

I feel like getting back to your question, the change in me about the word gay happened when I completed my +2 or while the +2 was going on, that is 11th or 12th. So around that time, I used to have curiosity about different organizations that work around LGBTQIA+ issues. And then I came to know about Blue Diamond Society. I just used to look at their organization and stuff like that through Google. But I never had that courage to approach them or something like that, because I was just trying to know the existence of other people like me. Or do they even exist? That was a question that I had. And I feel like when I actually made queer friends, again, it was after my +2, during this workshop about mental health, there were not just one or a couple of them, but the whole of people who were in that workshop were queer, especially gay men. Additionally, I think the perception changed when I had access to my own device. After my grade 10, I bought a device on my own, a mobile phone and after that, I got connected with the internet and then I downloaded a gay app, Grindr. So basically, that was also one of the ways, I think, it was around 11th. I was studying in my 11th grade. That's when I came to know about this app called Grindr. But then I still was very much skeptical. I was not very sure if I should really be using this or not. But still, things were getting clear to me that it's not something bad. It's not something negative but it's just a sexual orientation. I was just trying to tell myself that. There were many things that were giving me the idea that it's not really a problem to be gay. Just my friends who actually exist being queer, like my gay friends or my bisexual friends. Or some of the movies that I used to watch. Although most of the portrayals were very negative, but that still used to give me a sense that queer people exist.

And I think I remember one time that I saw one of the queer celebrities of Nepal. That was being featured on Himalayan Times newspaper. Every Friday – I'm not sure if they have it these days as well – they used to have a TGIF section. That's called Thank God It's Friday. And they used to feature different celebrities there and all the things that the celebrities have been up to. There was one feature of a queer celebrity of Nepal. I hadn't noticed that but a few of my friends

were showing that person. That person was a butch²⁵ I guess. She had short hair, and she gave really androgynous looks. They were just talking about her in terms of how she looks.

They were just questioning, is this a boy or a girl or something like that. I just got to see how people really observe, how my friends really think, queer people or just people who give both the energies, both masculine and feminine. Small, small things that contributed to me feeling positive about my sexual orientation, the word term gay. It's still a process I would say, because I think for me there's still this internalization that being gay is wrong or negative.

It's not as strong as it used to be before. But still a tiny bit. It's still inside me because there hasn't been acceptance, or I haven't been able to tell my parents about it which is something very intriguing to me about my identity or my sexual orientation. So, I feel like I don't seek validation from them, but still part of me really wants them to accept me for who I am and just not be in denial forever. So, maybe then this internalization that I have. Homophobia. That's still a little bit in me. I wouldn't say that queer people wouldn't have that with them. That's something that they're still navigating and trying to get rid of or maybe that's something that they're trying to heal themselves with. So, I think it's a process for me. I'm not sure if I answered your question (laughs).

I: Yes, you did. Yes, you did.

00:17:49

I: When you had sex education at school, you probably did a little bit, right?

D: Sex education? I wouldn't say it was a sex education (laughs).

I: But in biology, did you have something?

D: We had this subject called health and population where they used to teach about sexually transmitted diseases, but not necessarily sex education, because sex education is supposed to teach you more, maybe what actually sex is about? It could be something beyond sexually transmitted diseases.

I: Yes, of course.

²⁵ Butch is a self-description or identity that comes from the lesbian community. It describes masculine gender expression and/or gender identities.

D: It should be about the existence of diverse gender identities, sexual orientation, sex characteristics that there are, and gender expression as well.

I: And not only about procreation.

D: Exactly! That was the thing that was only being taught.

I: So, this was not existent at all?

D: No, it was not existent. And I feel like I mentioned in our last interview or not – when one of our teachers was teaching about STIS or AIDS, he mentioned that he just hoped that no one in the class was gay or something like that.

I: Yes, you said that.

D: So that was kind of discouraging or something that didn't feel right for some reason, even though at that time I was still navigating, trying to understand myself. Little about on sex education, as you said, they only used to teach about procreation, about sexually transmitted diseases, about what really sex is meant for and it's an act between a man or a woman. And they used to teach about family, but not diverse families that exist. So, it was not enough in any way what we were being taught.

I: Do you think it depends on if you go on a private school or on a public school?

D: Now?

I: Yes.

D: I think the things have changed now, because last time I was in conversation with one of the teachers and she mentioned that nowadays there's inclusion of sex education in the chapter in 7th grade as well. And there were actually texts about sexual orientation. Even if there were mentions that's still a thing, right? That's still important. That's still something appreciable. There was mention of sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics as well. So that's something that I found interesting and very important as well. So, I feel like these days, things have changed. I would say because people now have access to technology as well and I feel like, I cannot speak of all the teachers, but I feel like the teachers that there are who actually teach these kinds of subjects. I think they are now well aware about the existence of diverse sexualities and identities. So, I feel like they do somehow manage to teach, but I cannot say that

they do that exactly. But I feel like things have changed and also students don't really have to depend on the teachers to get that access to information. There's also information online. But still, the teachers' role is very important here.

I: Yeah, because teachers can still somehow decide how they are going to frame the topics.

D: Exactly, exactly.

I: And pick the words for explanation.

D: True.

I: And like, through their teaching, show their point of view. And it's never neutral. It never can be super, super neutral.

D: They take themselves with their own ideology and they are actually supposed to be neutral and just give the right information. But a lot of times they also influence the students somehow with their own ideologies or their own particular belief. That's probably wrong.

So, that's actually something that teachers have to keep on check.

I: Teachers can be very powerful.

D: Very much.

I: During your school days, you spend so much time under their teachings, in their classroom. So, they can have a huge influence, if you are in the same school for 10 years. Of course, teachers are switching, changing, but I had a teacher for 7 years straight like the same teacher, the same math teacher and he had an impact on me. He told me, I'm stupid. I'm not good in math. So, I'm thinking I'm not good in math. So, this can happen. It should be well monitored.

D: Yeah.

I: Because that's why I was asking, I was just talking to some students that just finished 10th class and they were very aware of gender and sexuality diversity and they are going to a government school, so I was really positively impressed.

D: Yeah.

I: That made me kind of hopeful.

D: Exactly, exactly.

I: Shall we try one before I ask another question?

00:24:18

I: So, I don't know if we talked about this already, but in one of the talks we had a couple of weeks back. At what age were you first attracted to someone? Like in a physical, romantic way?

D: It might sound really funny, but I think it was around LKG²⁶. Do you know what LKG is? Yeah. Just so you know. LKG, UKG²⁷, around that grade, I already started to like boys, of course, it was not something romantic or even physical. But I had this interest in terms of liking boys. There used to be moments when I used to feel like I'm just a girl or something like that, because I'm attracted to boys, of course, not physically and romantically at that time. But still, I used to feel like that was very clear to me. If not mentally but seeing as an outsider now, as I retrospect. Yeah, that was there. But after puberty, maybe like 13 or 14, there was this interest that I had for boys and it was not just liking, but also wanting to be close to them in that way. I think it was around 13 or 14. But still, questioning and just thinking maybe I like both boys and girls, it was not very clear to me. There was also one point when I was kind of attracted to a girl, but I later realized that it was just an attraction in terms of that I just wanted to be her friend or just liked her basically in terms of how she is as a person, kind, sweet and very interesting basically. And after that, I don't know, my grade 10, it was becoming more and more clear to me, because there was a little bit of more freedom, because after you complete your 10th grade, you just go to the college for only a few hours, right? So, then you have a lot of time to yourself. And I also had access to my phone. That time, I had access, and I also used to talk to people online. And that was also something that I feel was a way for me to realize who I was gradually, but I feel like it had been a process for me. It was not like, you know, a sudden realization, but something more of a process.

I: And did it come to a point already in school or in +2 times where someone felt as attractive to you as you to that person?

D: In my +2?

I: Yeah, or like in your teenage years.

²⁶ Lower kindergarden

²⁷ Upper kindergarden

D: I don't know, because it's considered taboo still now, of course. Things have been changing, but that time, things were worse. So, I don't know. I cannot say someone was attracted to me, but I definitely was attracted to a few guys in my classroom. If not strongly, but just in terms of liking, I liked boys in that way.

I think it was towards the end of my grade 11 that I started to talk to a guy on Instagram and then things went just so spontaneously and then I started developing feelings for him and so did he. And that was actually my first ever relationship with a guy. I mean, ever actually. And then we decided to meet up and we met at Patan.

So, I was staying again around Kalopul around that time. You know Kalopul?

I: No.

D: So, you know, there was different kind of nervousness and like all this exciting feeling going around. I don't know, it's just feeling weird and really fun and interesting at the same time, and we just had to act different, even if that was a date, you know. Like we met at Patan, but we didn't hug or hold hands. I had a strong feeling to hold his hands and we actually did gradually at some place, but it was not very comfortable with people all around you, you know, just to express your likeness for each other. And, yeah, I think it became more clear to me when I was in my first relationship, which was very short (laughs), just three months, but still that provided some sort of clarity. The relationship didn't end well. But still, it's a history.

But sometimes I used to meet guys from Grindr as well, even if not for something sexual, but just to meet them. But also there was like, I used to be very scared of people because I was very young at that time. I was just maybe 18 or 19, and I hadn't told anyone about it. So that used to be kind of risky and scary because I was not a minor, but still very young, you know?

I: And you never know who was actually coming.

D: Exactly, exactly.

I: And who you were talking on a dating app with.

D: Yeah, that could be someone else, you know. So, in that way, it was kind of scary, but then how Grindr works is that you just... Grindr is basically an app for hookups, sex. So, if you expect to have just a normal date, by normal I mean just meeting and having conversation, maybe more. Maybe you make out or stuff like that, but maybe nothing beyond that at that age, maybe. But it was not very safe that way. But still, I met one guy who was around my age, and

we just had a friendly conversation and just sharing each other's experiences about our feelings and attraction and stuff like that.

Not like we have for each other, but just generally attraction. And yeah, gradually I think things were getting more clear and clear as I was putting myself in those kind of spaces and those kind of things.

I: Besides this digital space, did you also have a physical, geographical space you felt safe hanging around?

D: I feel like I used to have relationships online rather than offline for some reason. Like I used to talk to guys who were not from Nepal, from different other countries. And then that's how also I used to feel like there was someone, you know, in that way. And yeah, before my first relationship, I used to talk to guys and just express feelings for each other and stuff like that.

But yeah, I was just remembering one thing, I forgot it. But still, it was kind of scary to also use that app itself because you would get messages sometimes randomly and because I live with my family, it's sometimes risky when the app is there and just if my parents or my sister would see it.

00:33:50

D: So, I think it was also around my first two, maybe when I was 18 or 19 when I came out to my sister. Did I share with you how I came out? I think I did, I think. But I can repeat.

I: I think you mentioned it, but I think you haven't told the whole story.

D: So, funny thing is, I was just like once commenting on one of Camila Cabello's videos on YouTube. It was a very random comment.

I: Yes, yes, I remember, you told me.

D: And that was the comment that got so many likes and it was on top. And my sister saw it and she was just like, oh my god, why did you comment something like that? I was like, oh my god, such an embarrassing moment for me (laughs). And then, I don't know, after some days, we just did some walking around Bhaisepati. And I was kind of emotional and just had this strong feeling that I should share with her, because it was just getting in me, you know. So, I just told her, and she was kind of positive in that way. I mean, she showed acceptance, but I still didn't feel very much accepted for some reason, I don't know. I mean, I don't know, it's a

weird feeling. I mean, she knows who I am, but we don't talk about it. I mean, I don't initiate a conversation.

I: I was just about to ask, how it is today?

D: She knows what I'm up to. I tell her everything. I mean, not everything, but basically the works that I'm involved in, she knows about it. I'm also involved in this organization called Queer Youth Group. So, I joined that organization when I was... It was in year 2020, when it was getting registered. So, it's a queer organization led by young queer people in Nepal.

So, I served there as one of the board members and basically, this organization does the work of creating content that's focused on SOGIESC. And also organizes different events that's about LGBTQIA+ issues. Like these are the things that my sister is aware of very well and still, she doesn't ask me anything about it (laughs). And I sometimes feel like, oh my God, ask me something. I don't want to share...

I: But would you like her to ask sometimes?

D: Yeah, maybe. Maybe. But I don't know, it's so difficult, you know? To tell her that.

00:36:55

D: Because expressing love here with hugs and saying I love you is not very common in Nepal even with parents. I mean, I'm talking about my own context. There's some sort of boundary there which is very important. But still, there's not much conversation happening except for, did you eat food or not? Or are you coming home? Or at what time are you going to office? There's never a conversation around how your day went? Or how are you going about with the work? Or how is stuff generally going with your life? I mean, I don't share with noone. I mean, when it comes to my family, but of course, I do have this kind of conversation sometimes with my colleagues and my friends, but I don't know. Still, family feels more validating somehow because I'm living with them and also because they are important to me. So, I feel like that's where it all comes in because the conversation doesn't happen really about anything. Not just about this thing that I'm talking about, like identity or expression, but rather about anything at all. And yeah, so with my sister, yeah. It was around that time I came out.

00:38:27

D: I'm just telling a lot of things right now. I think, I should focus on one thing. About the organization I focus on. So, yeah, queer youth group, I'm not sure if that can go here or not.

I: You can tell about it. I'm aware of that organization, only like on Instagram and their website.

D: So, this organization does these kinds of works and I've been part of this organization since 2020, when it actually got registered. In 2018, it formed as a loose network. So, it was not a registered organization, but it was still functioning by conducting different events and creating resources. So, yeah. And with that I feel like I've been in touch with a lot of queer people there are in Nepal. And I've also been working in different queer related issues like activism. And sometimes projects that have to do with art and also the element of queerness comes into it. Yeah. Like me understanding the queer community and me also accepting myself more has to do with me actually meeting queer people and also being involved in this organization. And also the internet that there is.

I: And how did you get to know about Queer Youth Group? Also just over the internet? Or did you already know someone?

D: I had followed their work on Facebook and then one of my friends who is actually part of this organization, they just sent me a message saying that they are looking for a new board member or there is a vacancy or a position for a board member.

I: But it was on a voluntary basis? Or did you get paid?

D: Still? No, it's just voluntary. Everything is voluntary, but my contribution is also there. I mean everyone's contribution. All the board members who are there also contribute in different events, we're fully focused and working towards it, especially during events like Pride Parade. And also sometimes to write content, like create resources. For example, one of my friends and I, we co-worked and wrote a book on SOGIESC. That's mostly for young people in a language that's more understandable to them, not something very academic and technical. It's not yet to be published. But these kinds of resources, the queer youth group is working to create in many different languages, 13 different languages. So, it's quite interesting that way.

I: But 13 indigenous languages of Nepal?

D: Yes, indigenous languages of Nepal.

I: And which age group is represented? Or are you trying to reach?

D: Actually, we're trying to disseminate these kinds of resources to different organizations and different civil societies who work with this particular issue, and you know, not make it something that they have to purchase, make it freely available for everyone. So that they have this access to information and the idea is also to give to different schools, libraries. It's basically an introductory book which discusses the basics of gender, sexuality, orientation, characteristics. So, anyone who would have a hold of that book would just get the basic information.

I: And is there already a date? Or a certain time when it will be accessible?

D: I cannot really say that, because right now this organization has been mostly focusing on providing legal aid services. That's why it's mostly focused on that. So, I feel like because it is now going to be having new staffs coming in as well very soon. So that would maybe lead to this being published soon, hopefully? But we will see when that happens. But some people are still working on it, I think. So maybe the idea is to publish it all together. But this is something that's going to be available.

I: It sounds very important. And are you funded from bigger institutions? Or from foreign countries?

D: In the beginning it was mostly struggling somehow for funding, but these days there are funds coming in from different donors, international donors.

I: I can imagine how hard it is to receive funding. So many applications, documents, bureaucracy. But very interesting. I delved into their work in June.

00:44:56

D: Also, one thing that this organization, Queer Youth Group, has done and that has been very significant, is also coining this word, a Nepali word – परलिंगी – which means transgender in Nepali. Because a lot of times there is this misinformation regarding the term transgender. So, people would just call trans people third gender which is not true. And not just transgender people they would call that, but also anyone who is not straight. So, I would sometimes recall it as third gender, but that's not me. That's just a legit gender identity. Very valid. But that does not represent each and every queer person, you know? And there is this misinformation, was I would say because it's relatively low these days. But I cannot say it's fully stopped. But a lot of online portals or newspapers used to sometimes give this kind of misinformation regarding the

queer community. And I feel like coining this word really helped. Now you can see this word being adopted, being used by different NGOs and INGOs. And sometimes in different government agencies as well. So, it's a nice thing I would say.

I: Yeah, I didn't know about the new word, but during my research the last year, I quite often just stumbled over तेस्रो लिंगी and सम लिंगी. And that's it, nothing else.

D: सम लिंगी is also problematic, because लिंगी means gender, लिङ्ग is gender, right? But sexuality means यौनिता. So, you would say for a homosexual person, सम यौनिग rather than सम लैंगिग. So, in that way also people are confused. They would just say you're a different gender, but it's not. It's just a different sexual orientation. So, in that way also it's sometimes very difficult for a Nepali speaking population to make them understand using Nepali terms which are already very problematic and misinterpreted.

I: But at the same time, it's also important to create words in Nepali language and not use words from outside, because then this notion of westernized aspects are coming in.

D: Exactly.

I: But it has been there forever already, not something which came from the West. Just like the words that are used are maybe coming.

D: Exactly.

00:47:42

D: It's sometimes difficult to say that things are changing, when you look at online and all these comments on different posts, Nepali posts like for example the post that's done by Routine of Nepal Banda and No Next Question. When you look at their posts where they post about queer related issues, you see all these comments from young people coming in, so much negativity.

I: Yes, yes. When the Supreme Court decision came out and Routine of Nepal Banda posted it and I was reading through the comments, and I was like: "Oh my god I should put my phone away."

D: There's so much negativity and queerphobia in the comments. And you don't even have that energy to debate with them because it's useless. It's up to them.

I: It's scary.

D: It is scary. Because I don't know, it feels like things are changing and you see all these comments. You see the real faces of people (nervously laughs).

I: Because they can hide behind their social media accounts.

D: Yeah.

I: And try to spread their words and find people who think the same. It's scary.

00:48:55

D: It's in Berlin, I guess, it was in Potsdam. It was not something – homophobia I experienced. Just one unpleasant experience that I experienced was, I was just walking around minding my own business, but this one guy was following me for some reason. He was just like you know. He was very direct about one thing. He said: "Are you gay?" I was just trying to avoid him and stuff like that. And he just kept following me. That was kind of scary. There were no people around there and it was a park. And then he just kept on asking me that. "Are you gay?" And stuff like that. I don't know. I just tried to ignore him, but he was just, you know, following me the whole time and then at one point I just scolded him. And then after that he started to go the other way around, another direction. But that was kind of weird. I don't know what was coming, you know. He was just asking me that and I was just trying to avoid. There was just one lady walking in the other direction. And I was like: "Oh my god." I escaped something.

I: But like after you scolded him. You just let him go.

D: But he was still looking behind me.

I: Were you afraid?

D: A little bit. It was a little bit like that because I'm in a new place. Yes. That's why. I was not scared, scared. But still I was somehow.

I: I'm sorry this happened.

D: Yeah, but still. I mean I'm generally not scared, because I used to walk around like sometimes 2am in the morning and sometimes 1am, in different times in the morning, when it's dark. There are still lights. But still, it was just an unpleasant experience rather than being scared. But still.

Something like that hasn't really happened, but just some young guys, when I had one time just worn like one small earring. They just told me like gay and stuff like that. And just talking with his friends maybe talking about me something. And yeah.

I: Where was it? Here or was it back there?

D: Here, at Basantapur, yeah.

00:51:28

D: But other than that I think, I haven't encountered anything bad, because these days I'm like so done with like, you know, not expressing my energies – both my masculinity and femininity. So, I just express, however. Because it's not something I can control, you know. Yeah. So sometimes when it's visible, I feel like, it's okay (laughs).

I: It's nice to hear that you gained this attitude.

D: Yeah, because it's so important for me. Because in my work as well, because I'm working with my colleagues, they are well aware about my, sexual orientation and also my identity. And also, when I was being interviewed, I told them about it, because it's something. That's part of me and then I will be working around these issues and maybe designing events related to queerness as well.

So, I have to be honest about it. And even in my other work spaces that I worked before than this. I was open about it as well. But the one that I did after my bachelors, like a couple of them, I was not, you know, expressing it, but then sometimes I used to be softly bullied, you know. Not up front or didn't used to point out, but he just used to mention that I'm very feminine and it's kind of problematic that way. And yeah, at that time I was not open about it, but still it was something, you know that used to be on my mind. But these days I just don't care. I have to be myself. I'm just done pretending you know. I mean it's only when I have to say it. It's not very important to say to people who I am. But then when it is important, I have to say it, because one time what happened that, you know, my friend was introducing me with one of the other colleagues and he just mentioned that, that he's gay. It was just a simple conversation, you know, you're just introducing yourself. And I just told him later that it was not important because it's not coming from me. He just told, you know, like: "His name is Dharendra and he's working here and he's from queer community." He's just told like that. It's just so random. And he just told me in a group of other friends that it's not that important. If I do not choose to say

that, reveal that, although I am queer. But if I'm not ready or if I don't want to then you don't really have to introduce me that way.

I: Yeah, I mean like even when you're heterosexual, you wouldn't.

D: Exactly that's the example that's I gave him on the spot.

I: Like this is, this is my friend. Whatever Walter and he's heterosexual. So, it's like...

D: Exactly. I gave him the same example, it was so weird (laughs). I mean I was like: "What the fuck did just happen? Why did you say that?" (Laughs). Like, he was basically introducing me to other persons when I can introduce myself. That was so weird.

I: And it's like...

D: Yeah. But still I feel like...

I: You should decide what you want to share and what is important.

D: Exactly. That's not important there.

I: Normal small talk, in an introduction, does make a difference?

D: Exactly.

I: It shouldn't make a difference.

D: Exactly, I don't know, what was his point.

I: I see. I would stop the audio, okay?

D: Hm.

Protocol 3

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview IDs: I4_Dhirendra_20240904_IA4; I4_Dhirendra_20240904_IA5;
I4_Dhirendra_20240904_IA6

Interviewee: Dhirendra, male, age 25

Duration IA4: 00:06:22

Duration IA5: 00:06:56

Duration IA6: 00:12:06

Location, Time: Boudha, Kathmandu (followed by a Tibetan street restaurant), 26.08.2024, 12.30 pm; conversation over WhatsApp, 04.09.2024, 1.00 am.

Type: Meeting in person, audios via WhatsApp

Method: Structured interview

Dhirendra's residence: Lalitpur, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Artist, German Student, Art and Program Manager

Background: Dhirendra and I arranged to meet for lunch. I met him at the museum, where I picked him up, and we walked to a nearby Tibetan street restaurant to have lunch.

Meeting details: We ordered laphing, Mo:Mo, and cola. However, the restaurant was extremely crowded, which made it difficult to have a proper conversation. On top of that, a severe thunderstorm broke out, making communication nearly impossible due to the noise of the heavy rainfall. We found ourselves shouting over the storm just to understand each other a little bit. Unfortunately, we could not wait until the storm was over, because due to Dhirendra's tight working schedule, he only had one spare hour of lunchbreak, so we had to head back to his workplace through flooded streets, walking through heavy rain. This left no opportunity for an interview.

Given his busy schedule in the coming weeks, we agreed on an alternative plan: I would send him questions on WhatsApp, and he would respond with voice messages when he had time.

Atmosphere: After saying goodbye, Dhirendra returned my camera, which he had used to take 22 photos. I wished him good luck on his upcoming German exam. Despite the challenges, we faced that day, we had fun and adventurous time, walking through the flooded streets in the rain. We shared many laughs, which helped strengthen our connection and build further trust.

Post-Meeting Interaction: Later that afternoon, I sent him the interview questions via WhatsApp:

- To whom did you openly come out, why, and when? How did you feel after that?

- Why did you decide not to come out in front of your parents, and what would it take to come out to them?
- Why do you think it is difficult in Nepali society to openly express your sexual orientation if it is not heteronormative?

On September 4, around 1.00 am, Dharendra responded with three audio recordings: Two of about 6 minutes each and one of 12 minutes. He mentioned that I could reach out if I had any further questions. I thanked him, and he expressed his hope that we could meet again before I return to Europe.

Reflection: Although the meeting didn't go as planned, the adventure of navigating through flooded streets and our light-hearted conversations made the encounter enjoyable. It strengthened the bond between us, and Dharendra's willingness to answer my questions later via voice messages shows the trust he has in me.

Transcript 3.1

Date: 04.09.2024

Duration: 00:06:56

Interviewee: Dhirendra

Audio File: I4_Dhirendra_20240904_IA4

I: MS

D: Dhirendra

Table of Contents

00:00:00 Coming out in front of his cousin

00:02:05 His sister's attitude to him being homosexual

00:06:11 Dhirendra's attitude towards expressing himself

-

I: To whom did you openly come out, why and when? How did you feel after that?

00:00:00

D: So, I'm 25 now and I remember the first time I came out myself to someone close to me, my cousin, was when I was 18. At that time, we were just walking around and then I had this moment of sudden realization that you know like I should really tell this to her.

You know, the fact that I like boys. So, I just confessed that to her, and I could see her – I could see in her eyes like how shocked she was a little bit and, you know. And then she told me that, you know, it's okay and then we hugged and then she also told me, jokingly, that she had already guessed that I was maybe like that, I could be gay or queer with certain things that I did or, you know, I don't know, anything. But she told me that she had maybe kind of assumed it, not entirely but she could, you know, guess.

Anyway, even if sharing that to her made me lighter, but at the same time I had this fear that maybe she would share this to her family members and to her sister. Although she had promised that she wouldn't. But still, I was still scared that maybe this thing, very secret thing at that time, she would share and then everybody, everyone will know about it. And then everything will get complicated. So, I was scared, but at the same time it made me feel really lighter. The fact that I shared that to her.

00:02:05

D: And I think, the same year around or maybe a year after, after a bad breakup that I had, I remember my family members and I we were sitting together to have meal and after everyone was done, me and my elder sister were the only one in the room where we were having the meal. And then I had an emotional outburst at that time because, as said I had a very bad breakup recently around that time. And I don't really share that to anyone and I just burst out, you know? That was something that I could not really control. So, I just told her what I was going through. And I hugged her, and she told me that it's okay to be gay and that she also has friends that are gay. She made me feel good that way. But after some days, what happened is that she just called and said that maybe we should go together to check up with a psychologist or someone maybe who can treat this. But this didn't happen that was just something that she told. Maybe she thought around that time or maybe she still does at this time, until this day, that it's something that's treatable, that can be fixed. And then I got scared when she said that. So, sometimes even if you'd come out to someone who's kind of close to you, if they don't understand, if they don't try to see things from your perspective, as well, then it's very difficult, you know? Because you're being very vulnerable and sharing something that's so personal to you and so important to you. But if they don't really show empathy or try to understand you, then you just regret it, you know? But looking back, I don't really regret regret, but sometimes I would feel, like maybe I should have taken time to share that to them, but it's okay, you know? If you keep waiting and try to keep that thing to yourself, then it'll just get difficult mentally and emotionally, yeah. So, I don't regret but I wish both of them would, you know, would try – or I maybe they tried, I don't know. But it made me feel better and I told them about that.

00:06:11

D: But now as I said I'm 25, so I feel like it's important for me to mention, only if it's important about my sexual orientation in the places that's important to be told, because everyone needs a safe inclusive environment to live in where they're fully respected and accepted and understood and loved. So yeah, that's what I'd say.

Transcript 3.2

Date: 04.09.2024

Duration: 00:06:22

Interviewee: Dhirendra

Audio File: I4_Dhirendra_20240904_IA5

I: MS

D: Dhirendra

Table of Contents

00:00:00 Marriage

00:01:26 Trying to educate parents about PoMSOGIESC+/hints to his parents that he is gay

00:02:49 Reasons behind not coming out to his parents yet

00:05:17 Wishes and expectations

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I: Why did you decide not to come out in front of your parents and what does it Need to come out to them?

00:00:00

D: So, it's kind of tricky, you know, because I try to give them hints, maybe not directly but sometimes I'm very direct about it. So, for example, when my father mentions about marriage, you know, when he mentions, even if subtly, maybe you should find a girl, or there's this girl that I think you might like, or this father approached, um, so, we can arrange a marriage between me and his daughter or something like that, you know? Then, I'm like, wait, was that a son or a daughter? I would just normally ask him and then he would be silent.

He just would be in denial because definitely he would think that I'm joking, right? But, because they would just not be serious when I say that, that's why I'd just not mention it anymore or something like that. I tried so many things.

00:01:26

D: I think it was especially around lockdown, maybe 2021 or 2022, that I tried to show a lot of, actually, queer content to my parents, especially to my mother. I showed her documentaries in Nepali about queer stories, about queer love, and about diversity, but she wouldn't be interested to watch that because she mostly likes to watch, you know, like, something fun, something that has, I don't know, comedy in it or something like that. But our stories are not put out that way in Nepali media, right? So that's why also it's not very, maybe, engaging for her to watch it. But anyway, I tried that, you know, so that I could step-by-step give her hints or make her understand or maybe help her empathize with the community, but I'm not sure if that helped.

00:02:49

D: But, you know, there was this point in my life, maybe when I was 19, must be 19. So, I just had this strong feeling that I should just, like, come out to them, you know, like, just tell them that I'm gay. But I just controlled myself because it's important for me to also be financially stable or at least be strong enough, be independent, although I am. But at the same time, it's Nepali society at the end. We're different. I mean, we live together, we have this sense of community, rather than the sense of individualism, you know? So, it sometimes gets difficult. But I'm not rushing, you know, to really come out to them these days. So, I think I'll just take time. I don't even know when I will come out to them. But I think they'll know eventually. Eventually. I don't know, they just might find out tomorrow or maybe they have found out already. They're just keeping it to themselves or maybe trying so hard to not believe it (laughs). Anyway, I think I will really be very extremely, extremely serious, like, hyper serious one day, maybe someday, and then tell this to her. But first, I have to be very, very, very independent, I think, financially and emotionally as well.

00:05:17

D: Yeah. So, I think I'm not trying to, like, really rush, but take time. But I feel like it's important for me to come out to them because I'm their child and I feel like they deserve to know who I am and what I like, who I like.

And then I would also maybe want to bring my partner home someday, yeah? And I would want them to treat him with love and respect and try to understand us, our love. That so often is not understood and made fun of, right? So, yeah. I hope things will change in the future and I hope things will work out. Yeah.

Transcript 3.3

Date: 04.09.2024

Duration: 00:12:06

Interviewee: Dhirendra

Audio File: I4_Dhirendra_20240904_IA6

I: MS

D: Dhirendra

Table of Contents

00:00:00 Representation in media

00:03:59 Education

00:06:27 Culture and traditions, expectations of parents

-

I: Why do you think it is difficult in Nepali society to openly express your sexual orientation if it is not hetero?

00:00:00

D: I think it's very clear why it's difficult for a lot of Nepali people to come out and express their sexual orientation because definitely people have this idea that being straight is the default and if you're anything other than straight then there's something wrong with you, right? So, because this is something that's already in their mindset and it's also something they're not willing to learn about diversity, that's why it gets difficult. And there are so many reasons why I feel like Nepali society is not very accepting, you know? Even if we have very progressive rights and laws for LGBTQIA+ community, but it still gets difficult because the implementation aspect is what doesn't happen, even if there are laws and rights, right? So, I think it has to do with resources, as well, because I feel like a lot of Nepali people also do not have the resources to learn about LGBTQIA+ people and even if there are resources, those resources are like, you know, the ones that give wrong information and not really updated. So, that's why also I feel like Nepali society is not well accepting but I'm not saying that all Nepali people are this way. It depends on person to person. But right now, I'm talking in general way because sometimes

it's easy to talk as a whole. So, the media representation also comes in and also how much it is being taught in academic institution also comes in.

So, media in Nepal, even if they would represent people from LGBTQIA+ community, they wouldn't really, you know, show the community of this, like, show the community in a positive way. They would mostly, you know, give the roles of comedian or the storyline only benefits straight characters rather than like, or the LGBTQIA+ characters are only shown as like, the side characters who do not have their own personality. So, the point is that there's no right representation and that's something that needs to be changed.

00:03:59

D: And the other point that I mentioned is like, in terms of education. So, in recent days, there are quite progressive things that are happening in education as well. And one of the examples is that some of the schools, if not all, I'm not very sure, actually teach about diversity and inclusivity from grade seven onwards.

So, they have this course where they teach about sexual orientation, general identity, general expression, and sex characteristics as well. But even if there's like this particular chapter, if the teacher doesn't really teach this, then there's no use of it, right? So, the teacher also plays a huge role in terms of making students understand about these topics and help sensitize about issues like these and not really, you know, bring in their biasness if they have. So, that also contributes a lot to how Nepali society would view people from LGBTQIA+ community because these children are the ones who are going to grow up at the end, become adults, and then they would form their opinions and ideology and pass down that to, or influence those opinions or ideologies to other people, you know? So, it's basically very important for an academic institution to also be very mindful and talk about these issues with sensitivity and keep having these conversations, because it's something to be discussed, it's something to be known about, yeah.

00:06:27

D: And of course, the other point I think would have to do a lot with also culture and tradition, you know? because Nepal, although it's getting modern, but I think it's mostly the Kathmandu – Kathmandu, it's kind of modern in terms of perception, but I think if you go outside the valley where I haven't lived, really lived, lived, I only go for a vacation sometimes, but I feel like the perception would be totally different from people from Kathmandu. Although I'm not really judging, they could be, you know, they can still be progressive, but I'm talking in terms of

having resources, what people have in Kathmandu, like, you know, different queer events happen here, and I feel like those also contribute.

So, in that way, I'm saying that, yeah, as I said, picking up on the point that I mentioned about culture and tradition, people would just want to follow the culture and tradition that's been passed down from generations, for example, marriage. Like, even if your child is of other diverse sexuality, not straight, they would still, parents would still want their child to marry anyway at the end, like, have a straight relationship, and I think that's where the problem also comes in. So, I feel like there are multiple reasons behind it.

I think it would also have to do with if the parents are well educated or not, but it also doesn't matter because even if someone's not well educated, they still might be supporting these kinds of issues, right? So, definitely education still plays a role because education expands people's horizons and help them see things in multiple lens, yeah? And I feel like there's so much expectations from Asian parents, like, not just Nepal, like, parents just expecting their children to give birth and, like, you know, their children to have babies and marry, be in a straight relationship, and, like, and hope that they can play with those children and be taken care of, and it's nothing wrong, you know, to expect that as a parent. But at the same time, not every children will be able to do it because some just can't because of who they are. So, it's very important that parents also try to understand what their children are up to, what their children are feeling, and there should also be a space, a safe and comfortable space for children to share that. Yeah, I feel like if there's a open conversation or room to have these kinds of conversations within the family, then things will get so much better because at the end, your family is important and what they really say will impact you, your whole life.

So, there should be a welcoming space, or a welcoming space should be created by parents as well. And sometimes I think children themselves should, without rushing, also I'm not rushing, you know, try to share that, and it's never too late or it's never too soon. I feel like whenever you feel like it's right to do it, you just do it.

So, I feel like that's it. That's it. I just answered number three, and yeah, thank you.

Participant Krishna

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I7_Krishna_20240725_IA1

Interviewee: Krishna, male, age unknown

Duration: 00:31:09

Location, Time: Himalayan Java, Maharajganj, Kathmandu, 25.07.2024 at 7.00 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Semi-structured interview

Krishna's residence: Kathmandu Valley, Nepal

Occupation: Dentist

Introduction and Initial Contact: Krishna's contact was provided by Ben. Ben reached out to Krishna and asked if he would be interested in sharing his story with me. Krishna agreed, and Ben sent me his number in mid-July. I contacted Krishna via WhatsApp, and we scheduled a meeting for July 25th at Himalayan Java in Maharajganj, as it was near Krishna's workplace. We agreed to meet at 6.30 pm, but Krishna arrived at 7.00 pm. When he arrived, he apologized, explaining that he is a dentist at a nearby clinic and had to quickly treat to children who came in just before closing time, causing his delay. He immediately struck me as likeable and open.

Meeting at Himalayan Java: Krishna sat across from me at the table and ordered a mint lemonade. We were the only guest in the café. I shared a bit about myself and the research project, and we then began the interview. Before starting, I had him sign the consent form.

Interview Process: The interview commenced with an introductory narrative, and I asked him to talk about his childhood, adolescence and current life and family. Although I had specific questions for him, Krishna spoke very quickly, often digressed, and jumped back and forth in time and topic. This made conducting the interview somewhat challenging, as I had frequently steered back and forth and ask questions about other topics he briefly mentioned before moving on to a completely new subject. Despite the chaotic nature of the interview, I believe it was relatively successful in generating the information I sought. After about 30 minutes, we had covered my questions, and we switched to other topics, at which point I stopped the audio recording.

Closing of the Meeting: Around 8.00 pm, Krishna mentioned that it was getting late and he needed to leave. He asked where I was heading, and since we were apparently going in the same direction, he kindly offered to drive me home. I paid for our drinks, and we went outside. He

drove me home, and during our farewell, he mentioned that he enjoyed sharing his story and that he would like to stay in touch and read my master's thesis. We said goodbye, and our paths diverged.

Conclusion: Overall, Krishan left a friendly and approachable impression. Despite the chaotic nature of the interview, his openness and willingness to share made the interaction valuable. We agreed to stay in contact, and I look forward to potentially sharing my research findings with him.

Transcript 1

Date: 25.07.2024

Duration: 00:31:09

Interviewee: Krishna

Audio File: I7_Krishna_20240725_IA1

I: MS

K: Krishna

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00:00:00

I: Okay, I'll start recording, if that's fine?

K: Yeah, sure.

I: First of all, thank you for your time.

K: No problem.

I: And let's begin with a short introduction. So, your name, age, pronouns, if you feel comfortable, sexual orientation, where you live and how you live, and your occupation.

K: Okay, so my name is Krishna, and I grew up in Kathmandu all of my life. But most of my life I live outside Kathmandu, away from my parents. So, my life is not very attached with family. Even though I love them, but still like, I'm not very emotionally attached to them. And, so like, when I was growing up, my father died when I was really young. So, I didn't have, like, father for years. So that really impacted my life later on. And when I was growing up, I was just like a regular boy, like, just wandering in villas, playing with boys. And then suddenly one day I got lucky, and I got scholarship. So, I got to go to boarding school, and that's where I learned, like, good education in English and all that stuff. And I stayed there for like 10 years.

I: Okay, where was that?

K: It was in Lalitpur, Jawalakhel, right next to chowk. So like, I got scholarship, and it was a good thing. I stayed in that hostel for like 11, 12 years. And once I finished my high school, like, 10+. I mean, it's called SLC during those time.

I: Yes, I know, I know.

K: So, I finished that, and I left that place. And I joined this college, which is also known as +2. And while I was in my, like, school hostel, I used to have those kind of feelings, I was growing up as teenager, so there was not much education about this queer and, like, sexual orientation. It's only you see on movie, and you get curiosity. So, when I was growing up, like, everything was strange. Like, I used to have feelings for other, especially men, like teachers. So, it was weird. And I didn't realize during those times. And later on, I learned eventually, like, through movies and magazines, and some people talk about gays. So that's how I realized: "Oh my God,

I'm gay.” And I was a bit disappointed during that time. But then this feeling grew stronger and stronger. So, during those times, I thought, like, I was the only one and there was nobody. So, I thought maybe, like, I wouldn't have any friends or maybe like a partner. And then it continued for, like, two years while I was in my +2. So, I didn't have any gay interaction or gay information, or anything support. It was just normal and pretending to live a different life. But most of my life, I was most focused on my studies because I wanted to be in good profession. So, I focused mostly on studies instead of those things. And once I completed my +2, I joined medical entrance exam. And I cleared that exam and got admission in dental school.

I: Okay.

00:03:55

K: So, that's how my life started, like, official gay life started while I joined +2.

So, before that time, I only get information and knowledge through internet and movies. And I had no interaction before that. So, when I was in university, I used to stay alone. And then, one day I joined one Facebook group. And through that, I saw, like, so many people. They were using fake IDs and fake names. So eventually, I made one too. And that's how I got introduced into gay people.

I: How old were you?

K: I was 21 there. So, during the first year, I was just complete normal. I was focused on my studies. And then second year, I just got curiosity and then tried Facebook for the first time. And then I got, like, so many people with fake names and everything. And I got hope, like: “Oh, my God, there is a world.”

I: Yeah.

K: So, I got hope after that.

00:05:04

K: And I started talking with people. And it started eventually from that.

I: What, like, year was that?

K: So it was, like, maybe 2018.

I: Okay. And this is, like, also when you had your first interaction with others?

K: Yeah.

I: Like, physical also?

K: Yeah, physical and if you are, if you want to meet people, it was more focused on sexual thing. Like, they were not any emotional. It was more fun and then leave and then that's it.

I: Yeah.

K: So that was the thing happening. And eventually, I started meeting one guy. So, that's how I learned gay life and also through internet.

I: Okay. So, internet helped you a lot.

00:06:08

I: Can I go a little bit back in time?

K: Sure.

I: Like, where exactly did you grow up?

K: I grew up in Kathmandu, actually. Kathmandu, Dhapasi.

I: Okay, Daphasi.

K: Yeah, near to Ben's house.

I: Okay, okay.

K: It's not far away.

I: Okay. And what kind of family constellations did you have?

K: So, while I was growing up, it was a small village, but eventually it turned into, like, a town.

I: Yeah.

K: So, there was no, it was just a normal Newari town. So, we used to have festival, family gathering, social interaction, that's it. And it was a simple life, like, you grow up, get job, marry,

continue family. But later on, I realized that I would never going to get married with a girl. So, I have to keep lying with family in order to cover up. And till now, they still insist me to get married.

I: So, do you have any siblings?

K: I have two siblings.

I: Okay.

K: Those are my older sisters.

I: Okay.

K: And they are married, so they live in their own house.

I: Okay.

K: And they have kids. So, at home it's only my mom and myself. So, like, people expect me to get married because my mom is old and getting sick. So, eventually they expect, and they get surprised, like, why I'm not married yet. And I keep making excuse, like: "My girlfriend is outside, I'm waiting for her", something like that.

00:08:00

I: And was your mom working?

K: My mom used to work as a farmer. We were farmers.

I: Okay.

K: We used to have a field. And during, like, different seasons, we used to plant different crops. So, it was okay. So, I used to help her. And now we, she's not working, she's just stay at home. Because she's a little bit old and she cannot work properly.

I: Okay, okay.

00:08:32

I: And I mean, you grew up in a boarding school, so you did not spend so much time in a family context many years. But in childhood and teenage years, besides the marriage thing, did any other societal and family expectations and values were instilled or, like, put on you?

K: In hostel?

I: Yes, and also in the hostel.

K: Not really. It was just normal life. Like, you're boys and you just talk, hang out with friends, study, and you focus on getting good grades. Those were normal life for me during hostel.

I: And during, like, going to university and then now, this time?

K: Now, like, I think different. Like, I think myself as completely gay. So, there is no attraction for me with girls. So, like, a lot of people here, they get married because of their family pressure. So, I've seen many people do that and they just keep cheating on their partner, which I don't feel great. So, personally, I just think myself that I would never do that. And even if there is a circumstance, I would just avoid that at all, at any cost. And I would just try to find my suitable partner, which is men. So, that's what I've been focusing on. Maybe, like, if I find someone, maybe I will.

00:10:30

I: And you mentioned that you haven't come out to your family yet?

K: No, because my family are very conservative. They are not conservative. But they are uneducated. So, I think it's very hard for me to make them understand.

I: All of your family?

K: All.

I: Even, like, relatives?

K: Yeah, especially relatives. Like, my family easily get influenced from relatives. So, I just don't want them to know about me. And my family are really stuck in caste system. They fear that I might marry a girl of different caste. And it will bring a religious imbalance in the family. And other family member might boycott them. So, they really fear about those things. That's

why I think, if I told I'm gay, that would bring more chaos in the family. So, that's why I haven't told any of my family, except my few cousins and some of my friends.

I: And how did they react? Like, your cousins and your friends?

K: So, like, my friends were really cool. Like, one of my university friends, she was really nice to me. And I told her because I think, she would understand her.

I: Was she the first person?

K: She was second.

I: Okay.

K: So, I told her, and she was okay. But she was also scared that other might find out about me. And then, you know, the university I studied, the place, it was a really religious place. So, people might do bad things, and she was just warning: "Don't tell anyone."

I: Why did you decide to open up to your friends and to your cousins?

K: I thought she was just falling for me.

I: Okay.

K: So, I didn't want her to, like, make her sad or disappointed.

I: And to your cousins?

K: So, like, it's a funny story for my cousin. So, one time I was having real bad kidney pain. I had a urinal stone. So, I thought I was going to die. And then I thought I might have to tell somebody before I die. So, like, it was really intense pain, like, excruciating pain. So, I just messaged him. And then, like, I am this. And then, like, he was okay. And we met, like, a few years ago. And he was really cool.

I: So, like...

K: I don't know. Like, he went to America. So, I thought he might understand. So, I told him eventually. We grew up together, actually. So, he is a really close friend of mine. As well as a cousin brother.

00:13:37

I: What will you do with, like, this pressure from your family to get married is continuously rising?

K: Yeah.

I: Like, how are you dealing with that?

K: So, right now, like, I'm trying to avoid... For two (unintelligible), I'm trying to go outside the country. So, I'm trying to move to Australia. That's what I've been working on. So, if I go there, at least I could just avoid this kind of pressure. That's what I've been doing.

I: And do you feel like, also, if you go to Australia, you can express your sexuality more?

K: Yeah. Yeah, so... So, like, in Australia, it's a gay-friendly country. So, I can get, like, partners, maybe good friends. And I don't have to pretend. When I'm with straight friends, I have to pretend every time. So, it's not nice. I feel myself.

00:14:36

I: Do you think this is shaping your identity right now? Like, who you are? That you have to hide?

K: Yeah. So, when I'm with my university friends, they talk about having a girlfriend and making – like, arranging me a girl. So, like, I have to pretend, like: “Oh, yeah, I like that.” Which I really don't enjoy. So, sometimes I just avoid their groups, too, because of that. But they are good friends. But still, it's not the same way as being with a queer friend. And also, I've made a few gay friends. And it's just completely... I just enjoy that way so much. Like, it feels so much better than hanging out with my university friends. I feel boring compared to my own gay friends.

I: I see. I see.

00:15:36

I: And... Do you think that people somehow sense that you are gay in your surroundings?

K: No.

I: Okay.

K: So, like, in order to avoid that, I act straight. So, I don't think they can tell me about my sexual identity unless I tell them. Otherwise, I think, like, most of the Nepali people, it's hard for them to guess.

00:16:14

I: And why do you think it's especially difficult in Nepali society to come out of the closet?

K: So, even though law supports this sexual identity, there is so much judgment and people don't have proper education about sexual orientations. So, most of the family and society, it's shameful for them to have gay people around them. And while I was growing up, they used to make fun of this gay and queer community in a very real bad way. And I think it just made me think, like: "This is real shameful and I shouldn't tell anyone about it."

I: So...

K: Still, my friends, I make jokes about them.

I: Yeah.

K: And, like, even on the, social media, when I see the comments, there's so bad comments, like, everywhere. Like, few people only does good comments, but, whenever there's gay content and queer community content, it's always, you know, like, very bad comments about them.

I: And how does it make you feel?

K: Like, I think the society is still not progressing. So, I think there's going to need 10 years more for them to be educated.

I: How do you think awareness can be spread?

K: So, I think, like, mostly through social media. So, we have to show our good work from this community. So, there's some good work going on, but still not enough. So, most of the big professions who are gay, they don't come out and that doesn't motivate others. And it also doesn't show good work to others. So, I think, when people from good community, like good profession, likes doctors, politicians or actors, they can show their good work. I think it will change people's behaviour and thinking towards gay community.

00:18:35

I: Do you also try to, like, make an impact or spread awareness to, like, certain people or rather not?

K: At the moment I haven't tried, but I wanted to try. I don't know the good... Like, in what way?

I: I don't know, like, talking to people who are homophobic and trying to convince them that it's not...

K: No, I just try to avoid them because I can't convince them, especially if they are homophobic. And if they make, like, bad comments about gay stuff, I will just avoid them, like, so... But I would like to do work for the... So, sometimes I think, maybe I could just give free treatment for gay community sometimes. So, whenever I make friends and when I see, people who become good for me, I just tell them about my profession and then if they are interested, I could just give them discount price or free service. So, I made few friends, and they come to my clinic and then I give them a lot of free treatments.

I: That's good. Very brave also, yeah.

K: So, when I was just joining my work, I used to think, I could give free treatment, but, like, I need a proper safe place. I can't just randomly call in other clinics because that's not my private clinic. That's... The owners are different. So, but still, like, my friends come, gay friends come, they treat them as straight guys and then I give them free treatment. So, but I want to expand that in more way, like, you know, like, everyone... If they come, I don't have to pretend. So, maybe, if there was a clinic specially designated for queer community, I would definitely work there and give my service. I would think like that sometimes.

I: I see, I see. Yeah, I just know about this one organization, which is, like, Queering Medicine.

K: Oh, yeah. I would like to do that, like, those kind of services.

I: Yeah, I was a little bit delving into their work. It was quite interesting.

00:21:07

I: So, do you have friends, like, homosexual friends or queer friends that completely came out and do you think they have different... It's due to their life situation or they have other privileges compared to you?

K: So, even if you come out, life is not always good. They always have to face shameful comments and insulting comments from everyone. So, life is not easy. I see so many people who came out. And if you walk around the place, instantly people will judge you. Like, oh, my God, this is, like, they use, like, really bad words to comment them. So, coming out as a gay man or lesbian, they definitely make a bad comment about you. So, I don't think, I could do that. That's why it just demotivates me. It doesn't motivate me to come out. And I have some friends. They act straight at home, but they are completely gay. But still, I have two friends who are very good to me. And we hang out for a drink most of the time. So, it's a good thing. That's why I enjoy hanging out with those friends rather than my university friends.

I: Because you can, express and share anything...

K: Yeah, I can express anything, we just joke around, and it doesn't hurt your feelings. I mean, it just gives you pleasure, fun.

I: Yeah, it makes sense that you feel more comfortable being yourself around those people who understand the situation, understand you and are in a similar state.

00:23:23

I: Have you ever faced discrimination?

K: Not really, because I haven't told anyone. So, they wouldn't discriminate me for being gay. But in other way, I have, like... Maybe, like... Like, in what way?

I: Like, my question is more about your sexuality.

K: No, because I... Usually, people don't know about my sexual identity. So, if I told them, they would definitely discriminate me. That's for sure. But I haven't told, so I'm straight in front of others. That's why, there's no problem.

I: Okay.

K: I haven't encountered those incidents yet.

00:24:13

I: So, is there anything else you would like to say?

K: So, yeah, especially I am very thankful to one of the guys. His name was Ken. He was from UK, so he taught me all about this sexual thing. And he's like a mentor. He used to teach me all about, how to have sex, how to have proper sex and what's consent. Before that, I was just thinking, this sex is just... It was really weird sex, so I mean, I didn't know how to have fun. And it was very painful. So, he taught me how to have pleasure and enjoy the sex. And that's good. I learned in so many ways.

I: When was that?

K: I've been trying to teach to others too, the same way. Like, people who don't know how to have proper safe sex, I try to give them tips in social media. We have apps called Grindr. So, people sometimes, they ask me medical stuff, and I give them ideas about how to have proper sex and how to avoid problems. He inspired me a lot. So, I'm very grateful for him.

I: When did you meet that person?

K: I think it was, like, 2000... Like, once I started joining Facebook group. I used to come to Kathmandu during holidays. So, I met him on Grindr. And then he just taught me so many things. We still talk to this day.

I: Was this person a tourist? Or working here?

K: Yeah, he was a tourist, yeah.

I: But... I don't want to say it's nice that you met, but, like, it's actually really nice that you had this connection.

K: Yeah. Otherwise, like, if I hadn't had knowledge from him, I would be doing stupid things and unknown things, which would maybe put me in danger. That's what I think. So...

00:26:35

I: So, like, one more question came up to my mind. Because I... A couple of years back, I already did some sex education workshops here. And I taught teenager girls also about LGBTQIA+ topics. And they said: "Yeah, we know already." So, they learned a bit about this

in school. I think they learned the words and what the meaning is behind. But you did not learn anything in school about...

K: I think... So, in my opinion, I think, whenever normal people, they learn about these things, I think they feel ashamed to learn and it doesn't encourage them. Like, they feel like it's a bad thing and shameful. So, they don't talk about it. It's just you learn and then you just never talk about it.

I: Yeah, but isn't it the same with, like, the whole sex education? That it's shameful?

K: Yeah. It's like a taboo.

I: Yeah. I mean, it's so... I sometimes don't understand. It's a bit more open where I'm from. But still, like, my parents wouldn't talk about it. But everyone wants to marry and have children. But this is, like, you need to do the intercourse. And it's important to get knowledge. And you have love in your life, physical attraction and romantic attraction and it's not only heterosexual.

K: Yeah.

I: So, it's, like, the whole spectrum. So, it's important to talk about it and normalize it. But I think it will take another, I don't know, 50, 60, 70 years.

K: So, even in our school, when I was growing up, we had a topic about sexual education. And they would just read the word, and they would never explain. Like, even if they have to explain, they would just explain in English. And it was a lot of people that didn't understand.

I: Yeah, I remember, like, I had just the first time in fourth class.

K: But I think in that way, it will improve. So, it's a start phase. It will take time.

I: Yeah, it's just, I don't know.

00:29:13

Last part not transcribed

Participant Sabin

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I2_Sabin_20240705_IA1

Interviewee: Sabin, male, age unknown

Duration: 00:22:03

Location, Time: Lazimpat, Kathmandu, 05.07.2024 at 7.15 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Sabin's residence: Lalitpur, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Artist, Curator, University Lecturer

Introduction: I got to know Sabin through Neha, a friend of a friend, who published a YouTube podcast a few months ago named “jhomedia”. One of the episodes focused on “Queer Issues” in Nepal, in which Sabin was a speaker. After meeting Neha end of June and explaining my project to her, she shared Sabin’s contact information with me. She previously contacted him via WhatsApp to ask if he was interested, and he agreed.

Initial contact: I messaged Sabin after I received his number. Sabin and I exchanged a few messages on WhatsApp and then had a video call on July 1, 2024. He invited me to a gallery where he was curating an exhibition. On July 5, 2024, he held an illustration workshop with other artists and invited me to meet him afterwards.

Meeting at the Gallery: I arrived at the gallery at 6.00 pm as agreed, but Sabin was still busy. I waited at a nearby tea shop and had some tea in the meantime. At 6.45 pm, he was finally free, and I returned to the gallery. He greeted me warmly and also introduced me to his student, who was part of the illustration workshop team. After a brief tour of the exhibition, we left the gallery and went to a nearby Nepali restaurant.

Interview Setting: We sat in the back corner of the restaurant, the only guests there. Sabin sat across from me. We ordered lemon soda with salt and discussed my project again. Sabin at requested and interview topic guide in advance to determine if he could and wanted to contribute to my research. I prepared and printed the guide, brought it to the meeting, along with an official consent form and a camera.

Discussion and Consent: He read through the documents but did not sign the consent form immediately. He needed time to decide whether he wanted to speak openly with his name or be anonymized. He promised to make a decision by our next meeting and bring the signed

document then. He reviewed the interview topics and expressed his willingness to discuss them. He suggested starting with his childhood experiences/memories.

First Interview: We conducted a brief interview about his childhood, the area where he grew up, and his family structure. The interview lasted about 20 minutes. Sabin spoke freely, and the atmosphere was relaxed.

Future Plans: After his initial storytelling, he mentioned that he would think more and might share additional anecdotes about his childhood at our next meeting before we are moving on to his adolescence and school days.

Photo Documentation Explanation: I explained the photo documenting part of the research project. I brought an analogue camera for him, demonstrated how it worked, and encouraged him to take photos of anything in his daily life that he liked or felt described his life. He could return the camera when he felt he had captured enough moments and aspects of his environment.

Conclusion: We paid, left the restaurant, and he invited me to another exhibition opening at the Nepal Art Council on July 8, 2024, to arrange a new meeting for further interviews. We said goodbyes warmly.

Transcript 1

Date: 05.07.2024

Duration: 00:22:03

Interviewee: Sabin

Audio File: I2_Sabin_20240705_IA1

I: MS

S: Sabin

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0:14:17 Change in outer appearance

0:17:55 Expectations from parents

-

0:00:00

I: My name is Marie, I am from University of Vienna, currently achieving my master's and doing a research project for my university. And my research project is about LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nepal and basically their life stories from childhood until today. Yes, and we hold interviews if you are fine with that?

S: Yes, I am.

I: And I record the interviews if you are fine with that?

S: Yes.

I: So, I ask you to introduce yourself, maybe age, name, pronouns, whatever you want to say.

S: I am Sabin and I am a sculpturer, and artist and prefer to call myself a visual artist, but I am also an art educator and recently I also resumed in dancing. I used to dance in one of the Buddhist forms. I used to learn that as a child and right now, I am exploring that again. And yea, that's about it as my introduction.

I: Are you from the valley or are you from outside?

S: From the valley, I was born here.

I: Could you tell me a bit about your childhood? Where you grew up? How you grew up? Who was part of your household? What did you do? What did you like to do?

S: So, I was born in Patan and I lived in the center of it. There is a core city. Patan has a very tight-knit city structure and so I was born inside this city structure. I lived for about two years in Patan in a place called Haktole. It's a small community – how do you call it? It's like – how do you define it? Like a street.

I: Like a complex of building?

S: We name places in terms of a unit that has a bahal and there would be certain temples. So, each unit will have a temple of Ganesh and will have some a monastery. So, I was in the unit called Haktole. For two years I was there and then I remember we went a little further, the place is Gwarko and since I was year 3, I have been living in the place. It is closer to the Ring Road of the city, towards the eastern end. Right now, I remember the green. It used to be very green, a lot of trees, the fields, there were only two or three houses in Gwarko. Now there're, I don't know, 500 more of them. And if I think of childhood, I remember that – so, Haktole is my dad's house and my mom's house is like two minutes away from that place in another unit called Gitchin/Itchin (?) and I remember playing in all these places. We used to play with sand, you know, there used to be mounds of sand placed for the buildings and while the buildings are in construction. I think, it is more or less equal to playing in the beach, you know? We used to make like dens, and we used to make like roadways and then play in the sand. And I remember the Ring Road itself that was filled with trees on both sides.

I: Wow.

S: And there would only be one or two vehicles at any given time.

I: Wow.

S: That was very pleasant. So, I remember that. I remember the frosts, the water that would freeze in the winter. I would remember playing with my neighbors. Because there were only a few houses and a handful of neighbors and we were all very good friends, very close. Now we all drifted apart, but back then all of the free leisure time, we would be spending with each other. We also used to play physical games. I remember that.

0:06:11

I: You mentioned that you stayed at your father's house and your mother's house was a bit away, were they separated?

S: No, I meant my maternal house.

I: Okay.

S: So, there weren't separated.

I: So, where your mother used to live before and then moved to your father's.

S: Yes.

I: Okay, I see. And how many people lived in your father's house?

S: The older ones. So, it was a joint family. It was my grandmom and then my dad, mum and us, me and my elder brother, and my uncle and my aunt and their three kids, my cousins. My dad also has an elder brother, and his son used to live with us. Nine of us used to live in the old house and when we moved, it was four of us. Mom, dad my brother and I and then my younger brother was born after two years after we moved. So, three sons.

0:07:47

I: What was your relationship to your mother, father, brothers, uncle, aunt like?

S: How am I going to define this.

I: Who was closest to you, for example? Like the person, you talked and spent the most time with?

S: My dad was very strict. Now, he is not, but when we were small, he was super, super strict. And when I think about it now, he shouldn't have, that was not necessary. I feel like that. I

think, I am closer to my mum than to my dad. I think, most close to my mom, closer than my brother. Closest I would say, when I was small, to my cousin, my uncle's eldest son. We were only seven months different in our age. So, we were very close, and we used to play together all the time. We were in the same class, same grades in school and we had similar hobbies back then. He was the closest, I would say.

0:09:13

I: May I ask what your father's occupation was?

S: He worked at the airport (laughs). He used to work at the customs at the airport – a very boring government kind of job. My mom spent most of the time looking after house, taking care of us. She had different hobbies, lots of things here and there, but she was more occupied with the house. My dad was mostly away. Because he had very random – his job required weird hours. He would be away in the night or sometimes we haven't seen him for two or three days. That's why, when I was a kid, I didn't see much of my dad on a regular basis.

I: And may I ask what the other male and female members of your family were occupied with? Were the female members mostly at home and the male members mostly working?

S: Yes. In the joint family, my uncle was more like a freelance electrician, but he was also always away from the house and then later, he opened a shop. I think, it was when we were teens. And female members, I think, all of them were in charge for house responsibilities. But I think, my aunt, she also did a lot of jobs outside. I remember her going to places and coming back only in the evening.

I: Okay.

0:11:33

I: You mentioned that your father was strict. Could you explain it a bit more?

S: If I didn't want to go to school, he would drag me to school. Or he would just scold us, you know? Very seriously. For the longest period of time, my cousin, he wanted long hair, and he couldn't keep long hair because my dad would feel that's wrong. Yea, but he has changed now immensely, and I had long hair for a while and my younger brother he always had long hair now. Very unconsciously he tried to follow the social standard of, you know, good or bad. Going to school is always a necessity. If we sometimes wanted to miss the school for whatever

reason, he wouldn't accept that. Usually, there's this fashion of punishing the sons and daughters but he never punished us like that. We should be in certain discipline.

I: So, not like punishment in a physical way, but more in an emotional way with words?

S: I think that he would scold us. I remember this incident when I really wanted a red bag and then I bought a red sling bag, and he said: "Red?! Red is for girls, why do you want red?" I just wanted red. Right now, I feel like I'm trying to villainize him or whatever, but it's not like that. He is a wonderful, wonderful person. I think, for about 15 to 20 years now, he is trying to understand the world better.

00:14:17

S: I used to compromise a lot with what I wear, what color, what shoes, you know? My teenage, I spent in greys and browns. Very sadly! (laughs). But the society, the standard, the expectations were like that and then I wasn't sure what I was doing. I started expressing myself through the things I choose. For example, wear a pair of shoes that is not very conventional. In the beginning, my dad would be like: "Is that lady's shoes?" And I'd be like: "Could be?" But I'd wear it. (laughs) I started exploring and choosing objects gradually and then this kind of became a normal thing later on. Now, even if I wear a very flowy, skirty garment, he would be okay. He would be like: "Oh, he's very artistic, goes to this art university, so it's okay!" (laughs). He thinks that way. Even my mum, she thinks it that way. And there's studs (?) and stuff as well, this is typically worn by female and girls from a different clan – how to stay. Because I am a Newar, we are not supposed to pierce our nose.

I: Like from a different ethnic group?

S: Yes, definitely. She would look at me and then she'd be smiling and say: "Oh, you are trying to be a girl from this ethnic group?" Yes, maybe (laughs). So, the acceptance kind of, I would say, is coming from the objects, colors and patterns that I chose. I remember 2014/15, I started wearing patterns on shirts. That was a bit of a revolution for me. People would normally not choose to wear these kinds of shirts at that time.

I: How come that you choose to wear new patterns?

S: Because I felt like enough is enough. I wanted to wear what I wanted to. Otherwise, you know, there would be things I wanted to choose but then I would say like no, this would be

outranging as a boy, I just going to choose something that is more boy. Also, the other thing was the market that wasn't as diverse from the things that you could choose from. At that time, I think, last decade the whole fashion industry started to be a little more experimental with variety also with men. So, that was good phase for me.

I: Yea, I feel so to like looking back the last 10 years.

S: Yea. And then the flowery, you know, all those patterns became very normal which wasn't the case 10 years ago.

I: Yea, I remember also back in Germany that everyone was only wearing very basic t-shirts in two colors. And this was like the trend.

S: Yea (laughs).

I: Very sad, actually.

0:17:55

I: One more question? Do you remember that your parents had like certain expectations towards you in your childhood?

S: They wanted us to just study well, that is the basic expectation. And I was creative from the very beginning, and they let me explore my creativity. I used to draw a lot, also dance a lot.

I: What kind of dance?

S: So, I am trained as a Buddhist dancer, doing the Vajrayana form of dance, but back then Bollywood was really, really big. I mean, it still is, but the influence was something else, because you know, we didn't so many different things of entertainment to choose from. So, lots of influence came from India, lot of Bollywood dancing. I was also trained as a folk dancer, ethnic dances from the South like Tanghe (?), Maithili and I also do the dances of the valley. Also from the mountain, so, we had these Sherpa dances or other dances like that.

I: Oh, that's nice.

S: I think, I feel very grateful, that I was able to explore all of the diversity. And that has been an input because which I find myself – I kind of got this quality appreciating all this kind of diversity. I think, I love the diversity, and the identity of these region is in the diversity. But I

remember, when I decided to join the art school, my mum and dad or I think, it's not even them, it's the expectation of the whole society, a lot of people where telling them: "Oh, your son has been doing so good in school and now he's going to arts?!" (laughs). And I was like: "What's wrong with that? I wanna do it!" But they weren't convinced, so I decided to study both, arts and management at the same time. I did it for my intermediate level, so doing arts in the afternoon and management in the morning.

I: Wow, challenging, isn't it?

S: Yea, it is! (laughs).

I: I tried to do two Bachelors, but it didn't work out.

S: I think, Bachelors is a little more difficult because you have to have more dedication. The High School, we call it intermediate here or +2. +2 actually means 10 years and +2 years of this (?). So, I did a +2 and intermediate at the same time.

I: Okay, wow. Respect!

S: (laughs). And then after that they saw my art and saw where I was going and so they're like: "Okay, convinced! Now you can do a Bachelors in Art."

I: That's nice to hear. Should we do a break? And then, we continue with the second part some other time?

S: Yea, sure.

I: Thank you.

S: Thank you.

Protocol 2

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I2_Sabin_20240802_IA2

Interviewee: Sabin, male, age unknown

Duration: 01:06:43

Location, Time: Garden of Dreams, Thamel, Kathmandu, 02.08.2024 at 7.00 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Sabin's residence: Lalitpur, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Artist, Curator, University Lecturer

Context: Sabin and I arranged our meeting at the Garden of Dreams in Thamel via WhatsApp. He had previously cancelled a few times due to his busy schedule with various art projects and work. I arrived at the location on time and took a walk through the garden. Due to the recent rain, I decided to sit in the café while waiting for him. Sabin was delayed by 20 minutes due to heavy traffic in the city.

Arrival: When Sabin arrived, he greeted me warmly with a hug and apologized for his lateness. We ordered coffee and began our conversation. He asked me about my past few weeks since we last saw each other, and I inquired about his current projects.

Pre-Interview: Sabin is currently working on two art projects simultaneously. The first involves drawings inspired by traditional Nepali dance moves. He showed me photos of those. The second project is a mixed-media series focused on the theme of water, using materials such as clay, papier-mâché, and paper. He also shared photos of this project with me and mentioned that he had been working on it up until just before our meeting.

Photo Documentation: Sabin also spoke about the photography documentation related to my research project. He mentioned that he had taken two photos so far and described the subjects. He expressed his enjoyment of photography and plans to dedicate a full week in August to taking more photos before returning the camera to me.

Interview Start: After approximately 45 minutes, I initiated the formal interview. I began by summarizing our previous interview to provide continuity, and we then delved into discussions about his adolescence, school years and university studies.

Interview Content: Sabin shared detailed accounts of his family, friends, his realization of being homosexual, and his time pursuing a master's degree in the UK. He also opened up about a traumatic experience. He was sexually abused from age 14-18 by his English teacher in school.

The interview shifted to a conversation on this topic, with Sabin speaking candidly and honestly about what happened to him. I could sense that discussing this was difficult for him, but he expressed that he wanted to share it with me, even though he rarely talks about it with others. He once got interrupted by a phone call, which was his father asking him when he will be back home.

Interview Conclusion: Due to time constraints and the fact that it was getting dark and starting to rain heavily, I steered the conversation back to my interview questions. Sabin also received a call from his father asking when he would be home, which prompted us to wrap up the interview.

We left the Garden of Dreams together after I paid the bill. Sabin ordered a taxi, and I waited with him until it arrived. We said goodbyes with a hug and agreed to stay in touch via WhatsApp.

Overall Atmosphere: Overall, the interview went very well. Sabin spoke in great detail and freely, and I felt that he was comfortable in the interview setting and had begun to trust me.

Transcript 2

Date: 02.08.2024

Duration: 01:06:42

Interviewee: Sabin

Audio File: I2_Sabin_20240802_IA2

I: MS

S: Sabin

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00:03:00 School life

00:06:38 First attractions to boys

00:08:57 First coming out stories

00:11:57 Sexual abuse by one of his teachers and mental health

00:30:42 His first love, his friend's group during university times

00:38:14 Female attributes and outer reactions

00:42:54 The idea of marriage

00:51:28 Representation of Queerness in movies

00:55:55 Family dynamics, acceptance within and appearance

00:00:00

I: Is there anything about your childhood, like a childhood memory that came to your mind since we talked the last time, you would like to share?

S: I need to think of it now. I remember hanging out more with my girlfriends and I used to dance. I was in an institution where I learned dance and art and other things. When we did stage performances, because there were no girl students and even if there were, for a couple of years, I always dressed as a girl, performed on stage. I used to really, really enjoy it. And I also remember wearing skirts, dancing and playing music out loud even at home. I used to dance for my mum and dad as well, when I was really small. But the stage performance was, when I was in my early teenage before there was mustache and stuff (laughs). I remember one time, this again was, when I was small, my cousin's sisters – and I think, that happens quite commonly – they dressed me up as a girl for a party and for many, many years my distant relatives thought my family had a son and a daughter, because I was dressed as a girl (laughs). I remember that. Then later I remember, because I used to perform as a girl a lot of times, some of my teachers thought, I had this body language and behave the way I do, because I was dancing as a girl. And they said: “Stop, let's make him not dance as a girl anymore.”

I: I was just about to ask how your dance teachers reacted.

S: They were very open-minded. I think, they were as enjoying it as I was.

00:03:00

I: So, okay, can you take me through your adolescence, like your teenage years, puberty, how your school was like, where you went to school, did you go to different schools?

S: I changed schools for three times. All of them were in Patan themselves. I studied until grade 3 in a school named Sunima. After that, my uncle shifted all of us, me and my brother and my cousin, to a school that was closer to our house. And that school was the worst school, I think as such. I was there from 4 to 7 grade. I was maybe 10/11 until 13/14. And because I really didn't like that school, I insisted my parents to change. I wanted to go to a different school, and I was a little bit (?) as well. So, I have changed. I went to another school, and I did my SLC, our graduation from school, there and I did my +2 as well in the same school, but I was also doing arts at the same time. I think, we spoke about this.

I: Yes. We talked about that you did like two at the same time.

S: Yea.

I: One was Business, right?

S: Yes, Business and Arts. So, I think, my comfort being myself – I mean, first of all, there was no recognition or differentiation of what my orientations were, what my sexuality was. I mean, that was not a thing to focus on in general, but also at those times boys and girls both still hold hands, we used to be physically. We were not as tabooed, not as restricted as we are right now. It was more of a casual thing. I remember one incidence, when I wore a dress inside my uniform (laughs) and then I was showing it to my girlfriends and even today when I meet them there are like: “You wore a dress that day!” And I’m like: “Yea of course!” It’s a little bit embarrassing now.

00:06:38

S: So, yea, I remember that incidence, I remember being attracted to a boy, I think, in grade 7 when I changed school to the one, I wanted to go to. So, there was that. I remember being attracted to, in general, being attracted to somebody when I was really small. I think, I was 7. We used to have tendence and my tendence’s uncle’s nephew used to visit in festivals and I was super, super attracted to him. I knew that I was different back then, because other boys weren’t attracted to older boys like that (laughs). There was nothing like that represented in television, literature or whatever. So, I knew I was different. But I learned the word gay, when I was in grade 9, I remember specifically there was this English class, and my teacher was talking about the word. He was explaining that how gay which means joy and happiness has changed and now refers to homosexuality and at that point I understood that I was what that meant. I was, I think, 15 years old, when I started learning what I should identify myself as.

00:08:33

S: I was very active, I used to choreograph a lot. If there was any program, I just made everyone dance and teach them. Bollywood was a big thing, so I would learn all these popular stuff from Bollywood and I was also doing folk dance a lot. I think, my school life went really pleasantly. I mean, there definitely were times where my classmates would be like: “Oh, let’s not include him.” I mean, they would make jokes, not directly. I never had anything bitter. You know, there are stories about people going through so much bully. I only remember that one incidence where

the boys were having fun joking a lot. I was not in the group, but I was close by listening to all of that and I felt a little bit outcasted – how to say that – I felt a little bit excluded. Something like that happened at my home a little after that and I was telling my brother, if you don't support me, because in school, there's already something like this, who else would be supporting me? I remember telling him that, but I never came out to him in my school life. I came out to my elder brother, younger brother and some of my cousins and that was about it. I don't know if I want to come out to my mum and dad. It's very tricky. I was in the UK, I was studying there doing my masters, and then I decided to come back to Nepal and when I was planning on how I wanted to live my life back here, then I decided to come out to my brothers. And they were very accepting, very loving. When I was in my bachelor's also, while I was 18/19/20, the life that I was living was more like a fake one, because I always had to have a façade, hide myself and then there was no space to express that much, and I didn't want to do that when I was back. So, I decided. And that's how I'm like this now (laughs). People look at me differently, but I kind of enjoy that.

00:11:57

I: May I ask what hiding your true identity has done with your mental health?

S: I think, I kind of developed obsessive compulsive – I don't want to call it a disorder. I call it OCB “obsessive compulsive balance” to balance things out. I still have it. It's been a couple of years that I've been kind of trying to harmonize with how my body reacts to things. And there has been – okay, I think I can, I decide to be anonymous. I think, it happened for the first time when I was twelve or thirteen, I had a teacher, and I hate him. He used to find ways to touch me and then expose himself in front of me. It was very weird and because I was gay and I am a sculpturer, I have this interest in anatomy, and I used to think why I was interested. When I used to talk to my therapist as well that I was interested like that, but that was out of pure curiosity. It was just general liking of – it's just how I study anatomy. But this teacher used to touch me. It started with him beating me, but later on he insisted me to sleep with him and then gradually and gradually it went to extremes. Right now, I actually would define it as rape. It actually happened many, many years, started when I was 16 until I was 18. Because by the time I was 18, I know I was older, but I still couldn't fight against that. It was just happening, you know? He had his own way of manipulating. This affected really – it's really hard for me. I remember reflecting that and I kind of made a mechanism that would allow me to live before and after these incidences. I kind of shut myself and then I used to consider these poisons not

to be part of my life at all. Like you know, there would be folders on the computer, and you delete those folders, I would delete all of these, all of the incidents and memories associated to that. I tried to delete all of that, and I used to consider this not a part of my life at all. But it kept on going. He would find places, it was a really long planned, manipulative, physical abuse I went through. So, all of this obsessive compulsiveness I have, I think, it came from body trying to resist and from my body trying to be okay. I used to feel very impure, and I used to kind of detest or hate this whole situation and thus my body in some ways, so I constantly needed this purifying. So, I wanted to purify myself constantly. So, I started using breath, because breath was constantly with me. So, I used my breath to purify myself. And then I used to, you know, blow in my hand a lot. In class as well, I would be doing that. And my classmates were like: “What are you doing?” And even at home, I would just do and then my mum would say *phu* – you know, we call it *phu* to blow and you blow whatever you touch, wherever you touch you just do this. Yea, she used to say that. And it went on like that until I joined my bachelor’s, and I mean, I was getting older, he was a pedophile and slowly he started to lose attraction on me maybe. That was a good thing. I joined my university and started making art. I think, after that, my obsessive compulsiveness diminished as well, significantly. Since 2005 until 2018, I was kind of loosing all of that compulsion. Art was healing me. Also, because he was not anymore part of my life, art replaced that. I was in a good place after that. And 2019, a couple of incidents, a couple of situations happened and then my compulsions came back, so it has been 5 years now. And during these years, I kind of went through my childhood and kind of understood what the reason for all of this was. So, I’m kind of still figuring things out, learning to harmonize with myself, my body, listening to my body and understanding it. And a couple of other triggering topics as well, but all of that got hidden because I was constantly physically abused.

I: Thank you for sharing. And I’m sorry that this happened to you.

S: Yea, I wasn’t sure if I would be saying this to you.

I: May I ask when you started talking about it? Like in a professional space with a therapist or did you already talk about it...

S: To two people, yes.

I: Okay, but back then in school, you did not?

S: Never, never. I started talking only talking about it in 2016/17. So, since this started to happen in the year 1999 or 2000, so I had my mouth sealed for 17/18 years. I lived with it for 17/18

years. To my immediate friends or to my friends from that time, I still cannot tell them. Yea, it's very difficult, I cannot tell this to my family or my best friend. I have not, because they would know who that person is. I mean, I want him, if I could, like in the movies, I would do that, but you know, it's very difficult to even go through the whole thing, you know? It takes so much for me. I don't want to bother anyone. I just want to completely erase all of that. So, for that reason, I cannot share this with any of my immediate or people who know that person.

I: Do you know if that person is still working as a teacher?

S: I have heard news of him, he got expelled from being a teacher. I heard him exploiting one of the younger kids in an establishment and he got suspended and fired from this place and I hope, he isn't teaching at all. I don't follow up, I don't want to. I had seen him once in the street and it was kind of shocking. I mean, I do not want to encounter any of those things, at least not now. And if I could at any time, I definitely want to speak up legally if he has to be jailed, I would be happy to...

I: Contribute?

S: Yea, to contribute to all of that. I hope, he is not teaching at all.

I: He shouldn't be. That's for sure.

S: But yea, as I was saying, I spoke about this to one of my friends that I started knowing in 2017. We became kind of close and comfortable. So, she was the first person I spoke to about this. And I was on Grindr, this was after I came back from the UK. So, all of this – I mean, I started opening up with all of this after I came back from the UK. So, I met this guy on Grindr, and he was the second person that I told this to. And then, I have this really, really amazing friend, I call him a husband (laughs). Just for fun. But he appreciates, he accepts the fact that I consider him that. So, I told him about this as well in 2018, I think. Yea, it's just the three of them and then I told this to – I was seeing a therapist in 2020. I told it to her. Since 2022, not regularly, but I have a therapist I speak to whenever my time is a little bit difficult. So, she knows, so it's five. With you, it's six altogether who know about this.

I: I hope, I am not too curious and if you don't want to continue talking about it...

S: No, it's fine!

I: But do you think talking to people help you to kind of process the trauma? It's a trauma, right?

S: Yes, it is a trauma. It definitely does. I think, because I was hiding it for so many years, 17-18 years, I really wanted to speak to someone about it. When I first spoke about it, I just wanted to let it out. So, it was very casual. But when I was talking with my therapist, I was also being very analytical, because I was going through so much, again! I wanted to know what the reasons were. It was one mind thinking all about this and one mind hiding all of this. Because when I share, there are also other minds thinking about this, too, so, there could be input or there could be care. There could be help. In that way, it definitely does help me process and kind of overcome all of this, yes.

I: Yea, I just was personally interested, because I am traumatized as well, but due to different things that happened in the past and for me it was kind of twisting my thoughts, my behavior, my attitude towards my trauma, when I started talking. So, that's why I was curious.

S: Yea, but in my case, I think, I started talking about this with that expectation – not expectation, with this possibility to have other like-minded people who would understand me or who would at least be there. So, it started with this positive “me to heal”, “me to overcome” kind of expectation.

I: Yes, it's most of the time good and helpful to have people around that have empathy and can be there for you, support you.

S: Oh, I also spoke about this to one of my other really close friends. She is very profound in the way she thinks, very mature. And sometimes her wisdom kind of helps me also. At times wisdom, but at times she also like gives me confidence. So just like: “Okay, I give you my confidence”. So, just these actions, this willingness to be there.

I: That's good to hear, that you have people like that around you.

S: Yea.

I: But it's just horrible, terrifying that this went on for such a long time. Makes me mad. Is it okay, if I ask something else or do you want to share more about it?

S: Anything, I can continue with this or with something else. If there're any specific questions, definitely yes.

(...)

0:30:42

I: You said, you felt attracted to someone at a very young age, but also in school times? Did you ever tell someone about that early? Or did you keep this for yourself?

S: Yes. And first of all, because I didn't know what was happening. It was maybe out of fear that I didn't say anything: But I used to like this feeling of liking someone. It was very pure and still is. Then I was attracted to – I mean I had random crushes when I was in grade 8, 9 and 10. In grade 7, I didn't have, I can't remember. I joined my university for my Bachelors, and on the second day I got attracted to this boy. It was very intense. I think, because also I was in my teenage, it was – I would call it love. It was super, super intense. Later on, we became really good friends, best friends. So, I was super attracted to him, and I used to hold him. We had this thing – very, very personal things. He was very openly accepting me. And then – how do I say this?! We had this kind of touch, where we touched something and kissed our fingers like this, see! Like that. So, there's this thing. My life was rainbows and butterflies at that time. But now I don't know at what point I confessed, but at some point it was too much to keep it for myself. I had another friend, so there was me, the guy friend and a girl friend. We were very close, all three of us. There was this moment when I told him, I really, really liked him. That was the first time ever in my life. I was scared, definitely. Maybe I was also planning how to tell this to him. He was positive about this. I think, if I remember it correctly now, he told me: "I respect the fact that you are gay and you also have to respect the fact that I am straight." He also told me: "You do not change to me. You will always be my friend, and I respect you." At that point, because he was an example, I also started realizing how to respect everyone's orientation, everyone's sexuality. I started respecting his heterosexuality. So, I was expecting very little from him, physically, but I still wanted to be with him, spent time with him all the time and so on. But after this confession, our bond became even stronger, and it went one step further from just attraction and crush to this journey of friendship. My other friend, who is a girl, she was always constantly supporting me and him. So, we were like a team, supporting each other, so it was really good to have them in my life. But, you know, we are very nice, and we follow the structure of society and he used to teach me how to walk like a masculine man. I was like: "Okay, let's learn it!" Things like that. There was this week in which every day we went to university, he said: "From here to there you walk like a man." Then I tried walking like a man (laughs). Now, when I think about it, I'm like: "Oh, that's so wrong". After doing that, I started

valuing my own grace, my own body language. I was more aware; I was more appreciative of my body language after that. At one point I said no. The things that I do, the way that I do that is completely unique and that is my beauty, that is my grace and I own it. Thanks to him I was able to reflect and accept myself. Before that, people were like: “Oh, you are so gay.” These comments were always there since I was a kid. People used to come and say: “Oh, you are a daughter son.” They would feminize my name, very casually, because all this shaming were face-shaming or colour-shaming or race-shaming, this is very common. People would definitely mind it, but they wouldn’t make big issues out of it. I wasn’t sure how much of an issue it was for me. I kind of developed a way, like everyone else does, to digest this, but it was always there. So, me wanting to maybe walk like man came out of all of that shaming. But after that point, I started completely accepting myself. That was a big maturity, I would say.

00:38:14

I: You shortly said that when people told you, you’re like a daughter son and you are too girly, how did you feel in those moments? Was it shame coming up or specific thoughts like something is wrong with me, this is unnatural etc.? Or did you just like hear it and didn’t take it so seriously?

S: I think, this happened less with the classmates. I used to be very weary about the fact, if my classmates were like this, what would happen, how would I react. Maybe there were instances, I don’t remember. It happened a lot with my relatives or the tenants or in general older aunts and uncles. They used to constantly comment on something every time they see me. They used to say: “Oh, you play with dolls” or “you are very curvy” or “we going to marry you off.” Oh, this happened a lot (laughs), every time I went to my relatives. This is because you marry off a daughter and for the son you marry someone in the family. Every time they met me, they used to say: “We’re going to marry you off, because you’re like a daughter.” Or they used to say: “Oh, you’re going to” – because I used to help cleaning dishes and all of that – “Oh, you’re so much like a daughter, you clean.” All those comments were not pleasant. I didn’t like it at all, but I had no answers. Even now, when they want me to get married, I don’t have answers. I mean, I do have answers, but I cannot (sighs). So, it was the same kind of situation, when they used to comment on that – very mindlessly commented on these things. I don’t know what it was, but it was something definitely unpleasant. I wish, I had answers back then. I wish. And I think, now most of them are exposed to those kind of things, but back then... Oh, there’s that incident. So, one of my dad’s friends – we call him uncle – he commented on this Bollywood

actor. He was saying: “Oh, look at this actor, he is so girly!” He’s so camp (?) at times. It was a crime, he was saying. I knew, I was like that. I felt so insecure and so afraid, because he was dismissing this actor. And he wasn’t even like that, he is heterosexual, he is married twice, he has daughters, whatever, but these reactions made things difficult for me. Because of these things, I was never able to open myself up as frankly. Maybe that was a reason I cannot talk about this with my dad still, because I feel his whole friend circle is still like that. I mean, these were all blockages, these were like chains that were limiting me to become who I am. And there were many incidents like this.

00:42:54

I: And is the topic of marriage still popping up?

S: A little less now (laughs).

I: How do you react?

S: I remember one of these incidences that happened in my university where I teach. So, there’s one teacher, she is almost my mom’s age, and she was very loud about this. Every time she would meet me, she would say: “Sabin, when are you doing the party of your wedding? I want you to get married really soon! This season! This summer! This winter” It was always like that, and I would present myself like this (points to his outfit, which was a female’s kurta, plateau boots and pearl earrings). And she would still be like that, you know. And she’s a teacher. She sees a lot of people and I would feel: “If you don’t understand this, how would my parents understand this. You encounter so many different kind of people and this still does not register?” I mean, I would think like that. I would always say: “I’ll get married, I take someone out, don’t worry. I’ll call you in my party, wedding, whatever.” But there was this small incident, maybe I was going through so much, was going through this dilemma. My obsessive compulsiveness was also surfacing and there was this time, we were eating in the canteen and then she started talking about this again. And I was like: “This was too much, I cannot do this anymore, I am going to leave.” Then I left. And since that day, she is not saying anything.

I: So, she crossed the line?

S: Mhm.

I: And how do you feel about speaking out loud? In such situations?

S: I felt as if I was free definitely. And there were one or two moments, when she was commenting: “Oh, do you remember? Now, I don’t talk with you about your marriage. Do you notice that?” And I said: “Yes, of course I notice! I’m so happy that you don’t talk about my marriage.”

I: Would you like to get married at some point?

S: I don’t know. I think, yes is the answer.

I: I mean, I don’t want to get married, I know that.

S: When I was younger, I wanted to get married. Even in my early 20s, I wanted to get married. I wanted to find this right person, who would be the Prince Charming, and we’d spent the whole life together. And now, after my mid-twenties, after a couple of unsuccessful relationships and dates and also with this friend – you know? The trio, the three of us, because I was deeply in love with him. Oh, they two got married. They are married (laughs).

I: okay, plot twist!

S: Yeah (laughs). They live together now, they bought a house. They have cars there in the UK. They live in Birmingham. They’re making their life there. They’ve decided not to come back, they’ve decided to stay. And since we were very, very close, we were doing everything together in our university time. We used to do all research together. We used to go travel places together.

I: All Nepali?

S: Nepali, all three of us. We were the topper students. Because you know? There is this competition as well. We decided to go to the UK together and we went to the UK together, we lived in the same house for four years together, so it has always been a very close relationship. And while doing this, I started kind of losing my attraction. So, now, when I think of him, I cannot imagine. You know, I would be thinking about my brother! He’s my brother now. I cannot imagine him that way.

I: I know that feeling.

S: Yeah (laughs). How was that happening, I would think. So, from that time onwards, I think, I never saw myself – I think, this came out of hopelessness?! Because my heart has been broken so many times and I don’t want to go through that again. That is the reason, I don’t want to get

married and to be with someone for a really long time would be daunting and difficult. But I think, somewhere I still like this idea of getting married. Maybe not married, more like living together, having someone in my life who is constantly there. I like that idea. But maybe in my late 40s, I would say, not now. So, when I'm old and when someone is old, and we both meet each other (laughs). Maybe or maybe not.

I: It also depends on what kind of persons you have around. You know, when everyone is starting to get married, having children in your surrounding and I can imagine, then the feeling comes up of "okay, I also want to have that"?

S: I passed through that.

I: Okay, you passed through that.

S: All of my friends have got married, all of them have children. I've crossed that age.

(...)

00:51:13

I: But at least there's like now today on TV more inclusivity.

S: There is, yes. There is.

I: Yes, which hasn't been there before.

S: Especially I think after 2015, in the middle of last decade, things started coming up and, in the mainstream, as well. Now, there are a handful of movies that are shown that are respectfully depicting. Otherwise, the movies that I grew up with as a kid watching, had representation of queer men in a really comic and derogative way. And it was, you know, always made fun off. Maybe at points I felt: "My life is a joke." Like that, because of those things. I think, I remember watching my first gay movie in 2012. And I always asked my friends to watch that movie with me, but they always had excuses – and they still haven't watched that particular movie.

I: What movie is it?

S: It's called "Watercolours".

I: But it's not South Asian?

S: No, it's European.

I: Okay.

S: It's American, I think. There's another movie, which is called "Shelter". It is based in LA. I used to love that movie, because I was like: "Oh, this is me!" This is exactly, what it is. Yes, those are the first movies, but there are many, many movies now. Many South Asian movies, even more stronger ones, I would say.

I: Yea, I've watched a couple of Bollywood movies in the last semester, but I cannot pronounce the Hindi names (laughs).

S: Yea, Bollywood movies, I think, I know.

I: But I think the worst movie I've watched was from the 2000 era which was Dostana.

S: Dostana. Oh, it's not a gay movie, it's not!

I: It's not a gay movie but they represent gay men but in this cartoonish way.

S: It just made fun of, again.

I: Yes. I really hated it.

S: Yea, Dostana (sighs). Oh, and there is this moment when me and my best friend, we used to go around and there was this comment by one of my girlfriend's cousins. She used to say: "Oh, you guys are like 'Dostana' actors." He felt really bad about it. He was like: "Oh, they are calling us gay. I'm not gay!" Yea, that was a bad one. And still, I would say Bollywood movies aren't as serious or respectful. There are some new ones if you know "Badhaai Do".

I: I've watched Badhaai Do.

S: Yea, they are trying to be more open-minded and there are moments that are really, really nice as well. When I watched Badhaai Do, I liked it. And now, I still think that it is somewhere still being – it has this long trend trying to exotify this topic. I mean all Hindi movies are like that a gay guy and a lesbian marry each other. I used to think like that when I was younger: "Maybe, I can marry a lesbian?" In that way, my life would be easier. Society doesn't ask me to get married. But I've watched a Taiwanese movie "Your name engraved herein", it's a lovely movie.

I: Your name engraved?

S: Herein.

I: Herein. I write it down.

S: It's beautiful, yeah.

00:55:55

I: Did the relationship to your family change during your teenage years until you started with your Bachelors compared to your childhood?

S: With my mum and dad, I think, no. I don't sense any sudden change as of such. I think, my older brother has started becoming more – he tries to be there for me. The younger one is on his own world, but he was also very respectful about me when I was coming out to him. He said: "I wish, I knew it without you telling me." So, I feel sorry for that, but he respects the fact. With my mum and dad, the change is there, positive. When I was young, my dad used to be very strict about what I used to wear. I mean, if I chose a wrong colour, he would be: "Why are you choosing this colour?"

I: What is a wrong colour? Pink?

S: Red, pink, bright, like that. I was in my late teenage, I was very greyish and brown, because I thought, this was the colour that no one would make comments on. My life was very grey and brown. But with my mum, I was always comfortable and there were times when I used to borrow mum's make up and wear it. But when I was really, really small, I used to insist my dad to buy dolls for me and he used to buy dolls for me. I used to buy exactly three dolls in a year. So, it was like that (laughs). It stopped, I think, when I was in grade 5/6. After that, he started becoming stricter. But after I came back from Europe, things changed, gradually I started expressing through the things I wear, through objects, through my own choices. I was always giving them hints: "Look at me! Please understand by yourself, please!" (laughs). But yea, they have been more accepting and even if I wear something flowy and very (?). At times, they would just say: "Oh maybe, it's just for an occasion. He's going to some occasion, he is different." They know by now that I am different. So, yea, that is the change which is good.

I: So, what do you think this being different means for them? Just like you being an artist and that's why you dress different? That kind of notion?

S: I think, mostly that, I would say.

I: This is just what I assumed because I know this from my parents that's why I said that.

S: Yea. I think, it's that. And I'm also assuming because I never spoke to them. I assume that they are a little bit fearful or they're in denial. First of all, they don't have much exposure and knowledge about gender diversity or sexual orientations. There's very little of that. On top of that, if there would ever be interventions like this from anyone. I think, the first reaction that they would have would be shame, I would feel. That's why I still don't want to, you know, speak about it, I am assuming. But deep down my mum probably knows it, knows me as an artist, but also as a person, as a biologically different person, I think, she knows. My dad probably is ignorant. I don't know by choice maybe? But also wants to be in denial. But I never talk about this, I mean, it's very difficult and I don't want to go through another exhausting phase in my life, facing all of this at the moment. But yea, I think, to back up, me being different, because I am an artist is a back-up mostly.

I: Because I just heard that quite often and I know this myself that my parents see me differently because I do artsy stuff, so, they are okay with my appearance and all about the tattoo thing. Like she's into arts and that's why she looks like that and that's why I was asking if they are assuming because you are doing arts, your outer appearance is different, and your behaviour is different.

S: Yea.

01:02:05

I: You still live in your parents' house, right?

S: Yea, all of us (laughs).

I: I mean, I know that this is common.

S: It is common. I think, it is the only way. And with this economy, it is difficult to buy houses as a single family.

I: Would you like to have your own space?

S: Sometimes I think I do, yes. Because I have also lived on my own. There are times when I imagine, maybe at one point I would rent, I would find a place and then live on my own for a

bit. But also, after this resurfacing of obsessive compulsions I have started choosing to be around people, because it heals me to be around people.

I: And like the imagination of living completely alone...

S: If I consider my mental health, it would be a pleasant thing to do. Maybe the best case for now would be me having a space on my own, living there most of the times, but weekly coming back spending a weekend.

I: So, to have like different options? So that you can basically choose how you feel like on a daily basis?

S: Yes.

I: Hmm.

S: Yea, that would be the best option.

I: Yea, it's interesting because you probably know that in many European countries it's completely different and you move out directly after school and my brother stayed with my parents until he was 25 and people were questioning that.

S: Hmm.

I: Why is he still at home? Why is he not living by himself? So, it's like the complete opposite. I have like no friends, that live with their parents.

S: If you leave houses here, they would be like: "Why is your son leaving your house?" You know.

I: And then people would question, what has happened.

S: Yes, what happened. And parents would say: "You don't love us." It's like that. Even if I present this idea to my mum, she would be completely shocked.

Protocol 3

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I2_Sabin_20240909_IA3

Interviewee: Sabin, male, age unknown

Duration: 00:28:26

Location, Time: Kathmandu, 09.09.2024 at 7.10 pm

Type: Interview via video call

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Sabin's residence: Lalitpur, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Artist, Curator, University Lecturer

Background: Due to Sabin's busy schedule, we arranged for a video call rather than meeting up in person. We agreed on a time for September 9, 2024, at 6.30 pm via WhatsApp. However, Sabin was delayed, as he had to run some errands, and called me shortly after 7.00 pm. He seated in a small street-side restaurant, while I was at home.

Greeting: We greeted each other warmly, asked how we were doing, and caught up on the past few weeks. Sabin seemed genuinely happy to see me. We quickly transitioned into the interview, as he was in a bit of a rush, stopping at the restaurant on his way to visit his parents.

Interview Setting: The interview lasts about 30 minutes. Despite being in a public space, Sabin spoke openly and in detail about the topics, demonstrating his comfort with discussing PoMSOGIESC+ issues even in a casual restaurant setting.

Conclusion: After I wrapped up the interview, Sabin thanked me multiple times for choosing this important topic, expressing how crucial he feels it is to engage with PoMSOGIESC+ themes.

He mentioned that he was looking forward to the outcome of my project, as well as to receiving the photos he had taken, which I promise to develop and send to him. We plan to follow up on this in the coming weeks. Additionally, Sabin invited me to an exhibition at the Nepal Art Council on Saturday, Sept 14th, which I plan to attend.

Transcript 3

Date: 09.09.2024

Duration: 00:28:26

Interviewee: Sabin

Audio File: I2_Sabin_20240909_IA3

I: MS

S: Sabin

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I: So, can you tell me again quickly what you are or have been doing since finishing university?

S: Yes, so I finished my university a long time ago. That was in 2012. After that, that was in the UK. So, after that, I applied for a visa which was post-study work visa. And from there, I worked in a museum. It's called Wolverhampton Art Gallery. So, I worked there for about six months, over six months. And from there, because my specialization was fine art sculpture, I was constantly looking for jobs related to sculpting or painting or anything to do with fine art. But for the time being, I was also working in a restaurant, I was working in a bar, making drinks, both barista and also barman. Yeah, so I worked mostly in the restaurants and buffet, etc, etc. And part-time, I was working in the art gallery.

And then two years went by and I decided to come back. And I came back to Nepal in late 2014, October, November. And then right as I got here, I got two jobs right away.

So, I started working as a coordinator in one of the organizations called Siddhartha Art Foundation. And I was also called in by the university, Kathmandu University, to teach art history and sculptures. So, I got really busy once I got back to Nepal.

And since then, I've been constantly working with the university and also with a few organizations here and there. Traveling around Nepal, teaching students and also teaching teachers to how to be creative and then to integrate art in their teaching and learning programs, etc, etc. So yeah, keeping myself busy (laughs).

I: That's a lot ongoing.

S: Yes. Okay.

I: I'm making notes, meanwhile, I hope you don't mind if I type a little bit because I'm calling from my laptop. So, you might hear me typing.

S: No worries.

00:03:12

I: And because you said you're very busy these days, do you have like a structured kind of day or is it different each day or like each project or like work you're doing?

S: Yes, it changes every semester. But we have like a week long structure. For example, for this semester, we have three days of practical where I teach the students. So, it's practical based, so they would be exploring with mediums and ideas and creating art. That is Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. And on Wednesday, I have a theory class with the other group of students. And Thursday, I'm a little bit freer where I can do my own work. And then also look after the administration a little bit because they are handing me over one more responsibility for this year, where I have to look after the admissions and also the student welfare. So, on Thursdays, I do that. And on Friday, I also have theory classes. And all of this is between eight to three. And after three, I kind of focus on my own projects or, you know, commissions there and there or other things for exhibitions. So, they will be structured like that.

I: Okay. And do you have your own art studio or can you work in university or in the college?

S: Yeah, right now I'm working at the university itself. I don't have my own space. I had a room in my house, but it's not in use at the moment. But even in the university, I shift from place to place, from classroom to classroom, depending on what kind of work I'm doing. And also because the classrooms are constantly changing. So, I'm like the migrating, moving artist inside the university (laughs).

I: Yeah, but it's good that you have like so many different opportunities to go to, right?

S: Yeah. And then my nature of work is also like that. Sometimes I do a lot of paintings. I also do ceramics. And then I also do sculptures. So, I kind of use all these spaces after the class hours. And yeah, everyone calls me trace maker, you know, because I leave my trace (laughs).

I: But that's nice.

00:06:15

I: Okay. And I would turn to your coming out or not coming out, if it's okay.

S: Yes.

I: So, you have come out to friends, right? To certain friends.

S: Yes.

I: Why did you feel like you needed to tell them?

S: So, when I decided to come back from United Kingdom to Nepal, I did not want to live the same life that I was living back then when I was younger. In my teens, I was kind of not living. I was not, it was not me. You know, it was already, I always had to keep a facade or act differently. But when I was away in the UK, I was kind of, you know, being a little more independent in the sense that I was trying to be more of myself. And I was finding myself. So, when I decided to come back, I wanted to be still me. So, before I came back, a couple of months before I came back, I texted my brother, elder brother, and I came out to him. To the younger one, I already had come out. And then I also came out to a couple of my cousins before I came back. So that, you know, I thought I would – so that it was like a backup for me. You know, if somebody, something would, you know, if some drama would appear out of nowhere, I would at least have my brothers and cousins and sisters to back me up. That was my idea, ideally. But I was also very, very scared when I came out to my elder brother. I was very scared if, before he answered to my text, I felt, what if he does not accept me? Or what if the life would be harder when I am back in Kathmandu? But as I planned, everybody accepted it. To my surprise, my brother was very, very supportive. So, yeah.

But at times, it's like, you know, sometimes when I'm a little bit louder with my fashion, or with my outfits, he would be like: "Oh, why are you still doing this?" And I would be like: "That is what I am." But yeah, sometimes he says things. But deep down, he supports me completely.

I: Okay.

S: And then a lot of my cousins are also very supportive. I think out of ten, I think nine of my cousins were very supportive, are very supportive. And I have come out to a couple of my colleagues and definitely to my friends, to all of my close friends, and to some of my students as well. I kind of talk about things that are with my friends, and with my students also, the ones who I feel comfortable with. But mostly the ones who have graduated, yeah. So, I kind of try and, I kind of, I'm making a space where I can be completely myself.

I: Did it change the relationship to the persons you came out to?

S: One or two, yes. But otherwise, not really. I mean, there was one friend who was very close to us while I was doing my bachelors. And when I came out to him later, I think 2016, 17, I guess, he stopped replying to me, texting me. Right now, I can only remember him. He never called back. Or I started texting him many, many times after that. But each time, he would just not answer. And I thought, okay, this one was not good (laughs). But otherwise, mostly nothing

changes. Or, you know, my friends would be even more respectful, or they would appreciate me sharing and opening up to them. So, yeah.

00:11:18

S: But I'm still scared about my mom and dad. I don't know if anything would change with them. I don't know. So, I don't know if I would ever come out to my parents. I have not decided yet. My brother would say: "Why don't you just book a flight and go abroad and live abroad?" (Laughs.)

I: Yeah, but still, you would still hide something.

S: Yeah.

I: And you would still have this feeling. But you can, like, have this kind of distance. And basically, it's difficult.

S: Yeah.

I: Easier said than done.

S: But yeah, I mean, I don't want to live abroad.

I: Yes, yes.

S: I think when the time is right, they would probably understand. And I give them hints all the time, they never understand (laughs).

I: So, you kind of want them to find out or realize themselves.

S: Just realize and ask me and I would say: "Yeah." (Laughs).

I: Yes, yes.

S: (Laughs).

I: Yeah, we shortly talked about that the last time, I remember.

S: Yeah, yeah. I'll keep, you know, giving hints, more hints. Maybe someday.

I: Yeah, fingers crossed.

S: Yes (laughs).

00:12:52

I: And in what way did the decision to come out to certain people help you to become the person you are today? What do you think?

S: I think the support and then the positivity and this openness to understand or try to understand the differences gives me, you know, that confidence. I think this desire to accept by my friends is my biggest support. And I think that, you know, when I first, I mean, the first one or the first few were very difficult. But then from there, looking at how much support I'm getting or how much, at least the willingness to understand was there. So, because of all of this positivity, I was more confident to come out to a bigger, bigger group of friends.

00:14:31

I: So why do you, like, this is a much, like a bit broader question and it's not really, it's not really, especially for you, but like for the whole community maybe. But why do you think it is difficult in Nepali society, in South Asian society, in Asian society to come out of the closet? Like the openly saying.

S: I think, to be open would also create a lot of obstacles, I would say. Because there are, I mean, half of the population, I would say, I hope less than half of the population still think this is not natural or, you know, this is against the nature or against God, religion, or in general, this is against the society or social norms. So, it would create obstacles, you know, unnecessary problems here and there. That's why it's kind of difficult. And even, you know, there are still people, I thought there would be less of them. But when I did my podcast in July, June, I think, when it came out, when it was aired in the YouTube, there were a few comments that were so ignorant and so almost hateful. And, you know, very, very, very narrow, stereotypical, ignorant, mostly very ignorant, I would say. And that made me think, my God, there are still people – I mean, not even the older generation, the younger generation were still talking, I mean, some of them were still talking like that. And I was like, okay, maybe I should be a little bit more careful, still. You know, they were saying so mean things and, you know, without any knowledge, they were just saying things. And that made an impression that, you know, there's a group of population who would still be like this. And that would just make life a little bit more difficult. Because I was kind of disturbed for a couple of days because of that. Yeah. And then I went to their profile, and they looked like losers (laughs).

That's how I'm controlling myself. But yeah, because of, I think, things like this, it's a little bit difficult in a broader context to be very open. I mean, but yeah, I mean, at the end of the day, that is what we should do. And I'm ready to just speak up or fight whenever I have to. And that's why I did the podcast. And that's why, I mean, I would always be there, advocate for the community, definitely. But just to avoid all of these unnecessary, unwanted and, you know, not very important kind of interactions or situations. Yeah, that's why it's a little bit difficult still. And yeah, even my family, I don't know if, you know, once I come out, what kind of conversations we would be having in the future. Or I don't know. That's why it's a little difficult. I mean, my family in general is a little bit more accepting. But in the broader context, the society is still very conservative. So, I fear that as well.

00:18:59

I: Like, again, about your podcast show. Are you not afraid or worried that your parents stumble upon it at some point? Or friends of theirs?

S: I want them to stumble upon it.

I: You want them to stumble upon it? Okay, okay.

S: I mean, I want them to watch it, or at least I want their friends to watch it. And then their friends would tell them and then they would look at it and they try to understand. Yeah, that was one of my intentions, has always been. I want my other elder, I mean, my aunts and my uncles to watch it too. And then realize that one of their son is different (laughs).

I: Okay, okay.

S: Yeah, I also wanted to represent and then kind of speak up for the queer group of students that I have in my university, also. So, you know, I wanted to be a figure for them as well.

00:20:20

I: So, you kind of in your university, in your institution, institute, like kind of a known figure and students can go up to you for like you're kind of a trustful person for people who are also queer?

S: Yes.

I: Like, is it like, is it like this openly known?

S: Yes.

I: Ah, okay.

S: Yes. I mean, I don't directly, I mean, I don't come out, come out to them, but you know, in the practical settings, because the students are very smart, they would just know. And because also, and I'm very thankful that I'm in an art school and people who join art schools are mostly, mostly very open minded. So, yeah, they are very comfortable or even appreciative of how I kind of origin. I mean, I kind of completely express myself as I am. And they kind of appreciate how I respect or how I kind of hold my individuality. Yeah. So, yeah. So, I have a very good space.

I: Okay.

S: In that regard.

I: Okay.

S: That's it. But, you know, the management, the other schools, school of art, school of education, a few, few people still are not completely comfortable with how I am. But I think that's the whole point, okay? To make them uncomfortable, I would say (laughs). Yeah. I mean, I cannot compromise on everything, you know, be something else other than myself as an artist and as an art teacher as the figure for my students.

00:22:34

I: And one more, one more question, because like this whole coming out thing is like very much, I would say, through my own experience, quite a thing of the global north. Like this coming out to your parents, this coming out to everybody, but I've read many, many articles and talked to many people that there are like also other ways to handle your gender and sexual orientation, to express yourself without doing the step of 'hey, you, I'm gay or I'm lesbian', like expressing yourself, not in the family sphere, but in another sphere or expressing yourself with clothes. Or I've heard of like women in India. I've read an article that just move away for a job in a bigger city so they get away from marriage. So, that's like their way of living their life. And what would you say, like, do you think there are other ways here to express gender and sexual orientation?

S: Just, yes, I would say, yeah, because I practically, I kind of express or I come out every day with my jewellery. Sometimes I am very loud with whatever I'm wearing, my earrings or my rings, etc, etc. So that's one way I kind of tell that I'm different. Or even the things that I choose to do, for example, I dance this classical form, which is very graceful. I mean, a lot of straight men also do this, but that is one of the ways I kind of try to tell that I am not straight. Yeah, with the patterns, I mean, for a couple of years, I think, when there were, I think we spoke about this also, when there were not many patterned shirts.

I: Yes, yes, we talked about that, yeah.

S: Yeah, I used to, I used to tell people that I'm different by wearing those shirts very loudly, and I still do that. Yeah, but sometimes I'm also afraid because recently, one of the manager was like, commenting on how short my shorts were, or you know how, because I just got, I just got promoted to become a professor.

I: Oh, congrats!

S: And then he was like, now he's a professor, why is he still wearing shorts and stuff? So, he had those kind of dissatisfaction with what I was wearing, but it was only him. I mean, in our department, everyone was like, let him just be, just do what you want. And even if I, you know, continue wearing jewellery and stuff, I think my department would still be supporting me all the time. Because when I used to wear nail polishes, also, you know, there were in the management, there were a few people who would be like, why is he wearing this, you should say something to him. But my coordinator was very, very supportive of how I was expressing myself. And then he was like, that is his, I mean, he was, in general, he was supporting my queerness. And then the way I, in my freedom of expression, he was supporting that.

I: Okay. So, is there anything else you want to say? Or you want to tell?

S: I think, yeah, that was the thing I wanted to tell you at the end. If I remember, I would definitely speak to you about a few things. Or if we meet tomorrow, we could also. And if I have to say something, I would definitely.

I: Okay. So, will you be also there on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday in the afternoon?

S: No, I would be there tomorrow. And then I'll be there on Saturday.

I: Okay. Because tomorrow I also have to shift my apartment. (...)

Participant Shreya

Protocol 1

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I8_Shreya_20240729_IA1

Interviewee: Shreya, female, age 22

Duration: 00:30:44

Location, Time: YUWA Office, Lazimpat, Kathmandu, 29.07.2024 at 3.30 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Shreya's residence: Patan, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Bachelor Student of English Literature and Psychology, Board Member at YUWA

Background: I met Shreya on July 2nd, 2024, during a discussion round at YUWA. YUWA is a registered non-profit, purely youth-run and led organization working to promote youth participation through empowerment and advocacy. The discussion, titled “Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes”, aimed to share personal stories, dismantle misunderstandings, and discuss homophobic and queerphobic stereotypes. Shreya and her partner (a transman) led the discussion. Shreya spoke very openly. Despite being the only white person in the room, she made a concerted effort to include me, interacting with me in a very friendly manner.

Initial Contact: After the discussion, I decided to reach out to Shreya. Since I didn't have her contact details, I sent a general email to YUWA asking to be connected with her. She responded via email in mid-July, and we scheduled a meeting for July 29th at 3.00 pm at the YUWA office, as she volunteers there almost daily from 12.00 to 5.00 pm. The office is only a 10-minute walk from my place.

Meeting: Upon arrival, I was greeted by a young woman who asked me to wait in the reception area as Shreya was finishing a job interview in the room next by. The person who welcomed me engaged in some small talk. After about 10 minutes, Shreya finished and came out of the meeting room. She greeted me warmly with a hug and invited me to join her in the meeting room.

We sat down diagonally across from each other. Shreya once more stepped out to get some water me, and a woman brought me black tea. Shreya shared a bit about the interview she had just conducted with someone applying for an internship at YUWA. We chatted briefly about how we were doing that day. I then introduced myself again, briefly discussing my background

and research, and asked if she would like to participate. She immediately agreed, and I explained the framework of the project. Shreya expressed interest in being involved long-term, including photo documentation and conducting interviews in multiple sessions. She also mentioned her plans to pursue a Master's degree in Vienna but found the university's formalities complex. I offered to help her with the application process, which she appreciated. She then asked me some questions about life in Vienna.

Interview: We decided to begin with the first part of the interview, focusing on her childhood. Before starting, I had her sign the consent form. We talked for about 30 minutes. Shreya was very open and shared deeply personal experiences, including childhood traumas and other significant events. As the conversation progressed, it increasingly focused on her mental health. I noticed her previously cheerful mood beginning to shift, so I decided to end the formal interview.

Post-Interview Dialogue: We continued with a more informal conversation, where I listened empathetically and tried to comfort her with kind and reassuring words. After about 15 more minutes, the conversation relaxed, and we discussed how to structure our future meetings.

Conclusion and Follow-Up: Shreya suggested we got out for Newari food and stroll around Patan, where she lives. We tentatively planned to meet the following Saturday and agreed to stay in touch via Instagram, her preferred communication medium. We wrapped up our meeting, and she led me out, showing me some paintings on the wall along the way. We said goodbye with another gentle hug, and I left the YUWA office.

Transcript 1

Date: 29.07.2024

Duration: 00:30:43

Interviewee: Shreya

Audio File: I8_Shreya_20240729_IA1

I: MS

S: Shreya

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I: So, I introduce myself again, because that's the process, how you do it. So, my name is actually Marie. Mali is my nickname, like everyone here in Nepal calls me Mali. And I'm doing this research project as part of my master's thesis and for my institute. And it's regarding being LGBTQIA+, in Nepal, and coming out or not coming out stories, as well as how queer persons can express their sexuality, their gender, their identity, in structures that are very heteronormative and very conservative. So, and I ask you now, if you can introduce yourself. You can tell what you like, as much as you want. But I would be happy if it would be very detailed.

S: Okay. So, I'll start from my name. My name is Shreya. I'm 22 years old now. I just turned 22 a week ago. My birthday was on 20th July.

I: 20th?

S: Yeah.

I: Mine was 23rd of July.

S: Oh my god.

I: Happy belated birthday.

S: Happy belated birthday to you too (laughs). And my pronouns are she, her. About my sexual orientation, I label myself as a bisexual woman. I label myself as a bisexual woman, but with queer identity, the thing about questioning yourself comes very often. I live in Patan right now. But my ancestral home is back in Pokhara. The place is called Bharat Pokhari. Right now, I live by myself. My family is back in Pokhara. I have a sister who is queer as well. I think, my parents will have a heart attack twice (laughs). About my occupation, I used to teach English a year ago. I used to teach English to Japanese students. But right now I volunteer at YUWA, yeah.

00:03:07

I: And you study, you said?

S: I study major English with psychology, bachelor's in arts. I study in a public college called Padma Kanya which is very patriarchal. Since it's already a public college. My data can track a lot of queer people, but if I see around my friend group, I feel like everyone has very patriarchal

thoughts. I think they have incorporated those patriarchal thoughts into their life. And now they think of it as more of a reality, which is very scary for me, because from patriarchal thoughts I am nowhere to normal. And the fact that my friends believe in that is equally scary.

I: I mean, if you are socialised in those structures, of course you will incorporate this in your way of thinking somehow and if this is happening for several years. How to get rid of it? It's scary.

S: Yeah, yeah. It is.

00:04:31

I: Okay, so could you take me through your childhood? Do you have any memories of your childhood? Where did you grow up? In what kind of setting? Who did you play with? What did you play? What was your daily life like?

S: When I was growing up, both of my parents were working, because we did not grow up with many resources. My dad started as an accountant in a few hotels in Lakeside, which is a very touristic area. He used to take me with him. That is also the reason why I think I am good at speaking in English, and I feel comfortable, because from a very young age I used to communicate with foreigners. The tourists that used to come to Lakeside and stay there. Growing up I was a big loner. I was bullied very badly. It was from a relative. She was as old as me, but maybe also because of how low my self-esteem was around my friends. They thought that I could be their victim. I could be their target. I do not really have good memories of childhood. I mean, it is pretty common for a child to have a best friend, but I do not remember having a best friend. I think it says a lot about me.

00:06:23

I: How did you grow up? Did you grow up in a joint family? Or was it a smaller family? In a house? In a flat? How can I visualize?

S: We were just my dad, my mother and my sister. There were four of us. My sister and I used to visit my village. It is in the border of Kaski and Lamjung. It was a very rural setting compared to the place where I was living with my parents. The fact that I lived with my grandparents in a village was also the reason why I could see not just homophobia or slurs being spoken out loud and proud. But I could also see the discrimination. I could see the hierarchy, because I

belonged to a Brahmin family. As you know, the hierarchy of the Nepali caste system is. Brahmins are supposed to be superior. There are different caste systems on top of the hierarchy is Brahmin. In Brahmin there are two hierarchical levels, one is called Upadhyaya, the other is called Jaisi. How you get from Upadhyaya to Jaisi is if someone from your family gets married to someone from a lower caste who is not a Brahmin. If I get married to someone from the Dalit community or someone from the Gurung or Newar community, especially someone who is not from the community, then everyone in my family is no more a superior Brahmin. They have stepped down from Brahmin Upadhyaya, which is the highest level to Jaisi, which is not elite as compared to Upadhyaya.

I: Yeah, it's interesting that it brings your whole family to a lower level and not just the person who is marrying someone from a different caste. I did not know that. May I ask what ethnic community you belong to?

S: Brahmin is my ethnicity.

I: Okay.

S: My ethnicity is Brahmin. I was brought up in Kaski, Pokhara. All of my ancestors are from Kaski itself. My mother and father are from Bharat Pokhari which is near to Pokhara city. It is 30 minutes far from the main city. And then my mother is from a more rural setting than my father. She is around 3 hours far from the main city of Pokhara. I think that also brings more into perspective of why my mother might be a different character than my father, because he had seen more things. He was exposed to a lot more things at a younger age than my mother. In a patriarchal society women usually don't get these opportunities to go out. It does not seem very appropriate for women to have conversations with men or even be somewhere alone. I mean, she got married when she was 19. She was pretty young.

I: Arranged?

S: Yes, it was arranged. My grandfather is very patriarchal. He started smoking when he was 13. He started drinking when he turned 16. He is still alive. He is 74. His lungs are only 20% ruined. He is a strong man.

I: Strong man, overcoming health issues, I suppose.

S: Also, my grandfather did not have a mother growing up. My great grandfather did not get married again, because he did not want his son to be raised by a stepmother. He thought that the stepmother would not love him, and he wanted to raise him by himself, and he did it. I think I can see – me being a psychologist – can see how the fact that he did not have a mother made him turn the way he is. He is very patriarchal. After my grandmother died, because of an open-heart surgery failure, he told my mother that he wanted to get married again, not even after a month.

I: Okay. That's crazy.

S: I know.

I: Did he get married?

S: No, of course not. He is 74. What is he going to get?

I: I don't know, like some people do.

S: Yeah, I mean, the reason why he wanted to get married was, he felt lonely, and he wanted a woman to take care of him, when he will not be able to do anything, take care of him, feed him, clean him and stuff.

I: Like taking care in the sense of doing household?

S: Yes, like the same thing a nurse would do in Western society.

I: Yes.

00:13:09

I: As you said, both of your parents were working?

S: Yes.

I: What did your mom do?

S: My mother did not start working until I turned 7 or 8. Before that she was a housewife. After we opened up a bakery, my parents did not pay much attention to me growing up. Maybe that is why it was very hard for me to communicate my needs. We were moving places a lot, so I

cannot memorize or remember many places. The only thing that I remember most is the houses and not me in the houses.

I: Do you have a place to call home?

S: I don't really have – we own a home, but every time I feel low, the thing that helps me calm down is laying in the cold ground. Every time I am anxious, that is what I prefer doing. Just laying on the cold ground and stopping my thoughts for a while, because I have ADHD. I was diagnosed with ADHD maybe a year ago and I think that is also why I overthink a lot. My mind does not stop, it keeps running.

I: Yes, I can imagine that it is difficult, like getting used to it and accepting it.

00:15:13

I: And would you say you had a stronger bond to your father or your mother? Or neither of those two? Or more to other relatives?

S: I think I did not have a good relationship with both of my parents when I was growing up. Since I used to visit my grandmother pretty often, she was my safe space. I could talk to her. I could feel safe with her. Like for me now, it is easier for me to talk to my father and tell him about what I like doing or what plans I have for my future. I think I would rather say it to my dad than to my mother because the thing that she is constantly worried about is me not getting married or me not being with a man rather than about my career or what I plan on doing or what I plan on being.

I: So, do you think in her perception, having a successful life means you being a wife?

S: Yes, me getting married, because for her, when she got married to my father a lot of things became easier. I mean we did not have – we used to live in a single room. We had one room where four of us used to live. For most of my childhood, I did not see my father much often, because he had five or six different jobs that he was doing to provide for us. And compared to that, because of all of his hard work, because of how good of a man he was, we are able to afford the life that we are living right now. Maybe that is also why my mother thinks that it would be easier for me to have a stable life and be with someone who has a good earning than just me being unmarried or doing something, because for her, marriage is a stable thing than a job.

00:17:50

I: And was it also like that that in your home, for instance, during your childhood the daily household target were divided by gender? So that you and your sister and your mother did most of the household? Is it also the thinking of your mother maybe that this is what women do and that is what men do? Or how do you remember that?

S: Not exactly. I mean, when we were growing up, my father used to work a lot so I understand why she used to do all the household chores. But my mother is not a typical housewife. I want to put it that way. Because I think my father has more of a feminine energy than my mother does. And she is very controlling. She is a control freak. And my father is more of a calm guy. He knows how to handle stuff. I think he would be the best for conflict management. He could handle a political conflict, too.

I: Okay.

S: (Laughs). I think, I have seen my father do household chores. We do not really have a gender role, but the gender role only comes when we have guests over.

I: Okay.

S: So, I think it is more about what my mother wants society to see than just what she believes in. I think, society plays a big role in her life. I am constantly reminded about how I should fit in. She has threatened me multiple times saying that if I do something bad, something that is not normal for the society, that is not a social norm, she might disown me or she would kill herself.

I: This is very...

S: Typical Nepali mother (laughs).

I: Wow. I'm sorry to hear that.

00:20:25

I: And you said you did not really have a best friend. Did you have someone you felt comfortable with? Maybe also when you visited your grandparents?

S: Not really. I think the only person who was there for me emotionally, when I needed someone to be there for me was my sister.

I: Sister.

S: Younger sister, but also, I did not feel like being a burden on her. Just because she is my sister does not mean that I have to tell her about all of my problems. I feel like I've dealt with most of my problems by myself. I think that is also why it is hard for me to trust or rely on people. Because I have been doing most of the things by myself.

I: What was my last question?

S: Did you have someone to fall back to when you were younger?

I: Yes, your sister. How much younger is your sister?

S: She is five years younger than me.

I: Five years younger. Is she still living with her parents?

S: Yes, she is. She is in high school.

I: Okay.

00:22:16

I: Did you have any activities in your childhood that you liked?

S: I used to play football. I think I was pretty much an introvert. I mean like Nepali society is more on studying than activities or having fun. Maybe that is also why I did not have time to do activities. There was no one to encourage me. I used to watch a lot of cartoons. Oh my god, I used to read a lot of Disney princess books, like Cinderella, Snow White. I think, I had fun back then when I used to read. It was for a consecutive period of time only (laughs). There was a stationery near to where I lived. I mean like, just past the way. The girl who used to own the place would let me stay there and read the books. And then I used to read and she used to tutor me maths because I was really bad at maths. She used to scold me a lot and I used to cry.

I: Okay.

S: I mean, I have been bad in studies for the longest time. I was good until 1st or 2nd grade. Then I started falling back.

00:23:57

I: At what age did you go to school?

S: When I turned 2. It was not nursery or kindergarten. It was straight up studying ABCDs and not playing games.

I: That's crazy.

S: Yeah, because my mother did not have time to take care of me. She wanted to do her stuff.

I: How long were you in school daily? How many hours?

S: I think, when I was around 2, we used to have school for 4 hours. Gradually, it started increasing. An then until 7th grade, I used to have classes for 8 hours. And then from 8th grade, we used to have classes for 10 hours. From 8th to 9th grade, we had classes for 10 hours. And then again, from 10th to 12th grade, the whole year, we had classes for 12 hours.

I: That is crazy.

S: I know. It is as bad as compared to Japan.

I: That's crazy. I went to kindergarten when I turned 3 until I was 6. It lasted the whole day, but we were playing a lot. It was just because my parents had to work, so I had a space to go. When I turned 6, I went to elementary school. I learned 5 hours daily. And then when I went to high school, we had classes for 7 to 10 hours. So less, it's crazy, like you went to school always.

S: Yeah, and it was nothing fun. We just used to study and that was it. I mean, I remember my ass being sore because I was sitting on the bed the whole time. We did not have comfortable seats. It was like a bench.

I: And was it the same school you went to from age 2 onwards?

S: No.

I: Or different schools?

S: I studied from nursery to 7th grade in the same school. Then I had to move to another school from 8th to 10th grade. Then I went to high school in a different college from 11th to 12th grade. All three schools were very different. The first school was a place where I was bullied. I did not have many friends. Most of the time, people would come up to me just for my lunch. We had bakeries and I used to bring bakery stuff, cakes and stuff. They used to just come for my lunch. And then in 8th grade, I was bullied because I was the only Brahmin person in the school. And then in 11th and 12th, it was okay-ish. It was decent. Guys used to hit on me a lot. I knew I was bisexual back then. I made it pretty clear. It was irrelevant to them.

00:27:45

I: Were you able during your adolescence, teenage years to make good friends during your teenage years?

S: I only found good friends after I joined my bachelors. I really have a small group. These are the people I can go up to and talk to anytime. I do not have to text them constantly. It is very draining for me to keep texting people.

I: Yes.

S: I am really happy that I found these people. I think the most significant reason why I was not good at speaking or making friends was because I went through sexual abuse most of my childhood. It started happening since I turned 8. It happened until I was 14. The reason it stopped was because the person died.

I: I'm sorry to hear that. That is horrible.

S: Yeah. I think I am over it now. I think that is also why it is hard for me to remember my childhood. My body was going through all those trauma. I could not really concentrate on my studies or on what was happening with me.

I: It is the usual way the body or the mind processes things. If it is a trauma, it just blocks. So, I see. So, actually we are finished with childhood. Should we take a break, and I will process what we talked about today. And maybe some topics come up the next time we meet again?

(...)

Protocol 2

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I8_Shreya_20240807_IA2

Interviewee: Shreya, female, age 22

Duration: 00:35:34

Location, Time: Patan House Café, Patan, Lalitpur, 07.08.2024 at 7.15 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Shreya's residence: Patan, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Bachelor Student of English Literature and Psychology, Board Member at YUWA

Introduction: Shreya and I communicated over Instagram direct messaging, her preferred medium of staying in touch. We arranged a meeting for August 7th, at 6.30 pm at the Patan House Café where Shreya lives which is near the Patan Durbar Square. However, due to heavy rain and rush hour traffic, I arrived 30 minutes late. Despite the delay, Shreya was understanding and patient.

Pre-Interview Interaction: When I reached the meeting point at 7.00 pm, I informed Shreya that I was outside. She promptly came down to meet me, greeting me warmly with a hug. We entered the café, sat down outside under a covered-up area, ordered lemon tea, and spent some time in casual conversation. During this time, Shreya mentioned that she was feeling stressed and smoked a cigarette to calm down. Gradually, she seemed to relax and become more comfortable.

Interview Session: After approximately 15 minutes of informal conversation, we transitioned into the interview. I began by summarizing our previous discussion, which helped set the context for the current session. We then focused on exploring Shreya's experiences during her teenage years and school life. She spoke with enthusiasm and detail for just over half an hour. During our conversation, we were briefly interrupted by a family of cats that approached us, which provided a light-hearted distraction and some laughter.

Post-Interview Discussion: Although the formal interview ended, Shreya continued to share more personal insights. She discussed the difficulties faced by transgender individuals in pursuing transitions in Nepal and India, and more broadly, in South Asia. She explained that while doctors do prescribe hormones, patients are often not informed about severe side effects they might experience. These hormones are expensive and are seen by some medical

professionals as a profit-making tool. This situation differs from countries like Germany, where such medications are prescribed only after thorough consultations. Shreya also mentioned her partner, a trans man, who had taken hormones but experienced significant health issues due to being unaware of the potential side effects. Additionally, she spoke about two trans women who had travelled to India for transition surgeries, as such procedures are not available in Nepal. Tragically, one of the women passed away during surgery due to the questionable practices of the clinic involved.

Conclusion of the Meeting: After Shreya shared these experiences, we paid for our tea as the café was closing and decided to continue our conversation at a nearby restaurant. There, we enjoyed a traditional Newari meal and spent about two more hours together. Shreya also gave me a brief tour of the temple complexes in Patan, where she explained various aspects of the Hindu and Buddhist figures, deities, and temples. We ended our evening around 10.30 pm, parting ways with a sense of warmth and friendship. The meeting felt intimate and built a stronger connection between us. We will schedule another meeting soon, again via Instagram.

Transcript 2

Date: 07.08.2024

Duration: 00:30:43

Interviewee: Shreya

Audio File: I8_Shreya_20240807_IA2

I: MS

S: Shreya

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00:00:00

S: I put the phone nearby, because of the rain.

I: Yeah, you can just hold it to your mouth.

S: Yes (laughs).

I: So, I remember that you already talked a little bit about your school, right? But could you still, like, imagine your teenage years and what kind of memories you still have? And just, like, start with whatever comes to your mind first.

S: Okay. I think if I reflect on my teenage years, I think I had access to internet pretty soon, which also did a lot of damage, because then I had access to porn and then other stuff. So, like, I will usually see men and women, so very heterosexual relationship and sex, so which also made me think that it was normal. And I don't blame it on just porn, but a lot of representation that I saw when I was younger, it was very heterosexual. And I don't remember seeing many queer people around me that time, and so I always thought – I mean, I always knew I was attracted to women, but then I never felt, I was anything different. I mean, I did, but it did not bother me as much as it does now, because I never felt identity was such a big deal. And reflecting now, I think I spent a lot of time overthinking, and I never found myself attracted to men, I mean, like, boys in my class. And then I was crazily obsessed with this one senior. And she was very pretty, okay? And what I felt was, I felt sort of jealousy when I saw different boys trying to hit on her, and it made me feel like, maybe I was just trying to protect her and nothing more than that. I never thought that I was romantically attracted to her.

So, I think representation played a lot of impact in my upbringing. And the memories of my teenage years are very blurred, because we spent a lot of time studying, we had tuitions and stuff, and there were no spaces where I could talk with men or even women about dating. I feel like there still are no dating spaces, which also makes it harder for young people to date. And we are a very career-oriented society, so I think it's very hard for people to date, even when they are in their 20s.

And reflecting on my teenage years, we did not have access to sex education or education about gender and identity or good touch, bad touch, or stuff like that, especially things related to sex ed. And I think that is also what impacted a lot of people, because I have met a lot of people who do not think that being asexual is being queer. They just think that that is normal, to not

have sexual desires or romantic desires. So, I think that should really be talked about. And I think it would have been easier for me to find who I am if I had known about that thing.

00:04:26

I: So, how or when did you learn about diverse genders and sexualities? Also, through internet, through your own research? Or how did this come upon you?

S: I think it was when I was in high school. Especially in my 11th or 12th grade, senior high school. I think that was the time when things about being queer were on the internet. And I think that led me to the realization that I might not be straight. I was dating a guy back then, but I had this moment where I confessed to him that I'm not straight. I like you, but I'm also attracted to women. And telling this to other people who I'm not dating, they will take it as if I'm dating a girl. It's like I'm not in a serious relationship and it's not going to last long. So, it means that I'm open to dating people. So, I think that was the time when I realised that I was not heterosexual. Yeah.

00:05:51

I: But what was – because you said you always knew that you are not heterosexual. But wasn't there like...

S: I think I never knew about the labels. I knew that I was not just attracted to men, but I did not know that I was bisexual. It was hard for me to label myself at first because I did not feel like it was necessary. Also, because I think I had no awareness about it. It is also because of lack of research. Our syllabus does not cover these things. Even still now, the school courses are not very inclusive. And so young people do not know about this. Most of the time they are bullied for being feminine or being masculine and putting on make-up or not putting on make-up. So, I think that narrative is also what kept me grounded or maybe kept me restricted. And I felt like I was obliged to feel that way or I was obliged to just be attracted to men. Because I think even if now, I have to confess to my cousins or someone about me not being straight, I think I will have a very hard time, and I don't think they will accept me. So, I think a lot of it comes from how restrictive our society is and the narrative of being this perfect girl or a perfect boy. Because the expectation that my parents have from me is to get married to a boy, obviously, cis man, and to have a child, of course. And that is just the steps that I can go forward to.

00:08:04

I: Can you tell me a little bit more in detail about the person, the girl you were first attracted to? And how this evolved?

S: Okay. So, I think I was in 6th or 7th grade when that happened.

I: How old were you there?

S: 12, 13.

I: Because we have a little bit of a different grade system.

S: Grading system? I think I was 12 or so. Around that. Because I remember being 14 when I was in 8th grade, yeah. So, about the girl. She was very attractive, and she had long hair and very feminine and very curvy. She was the prettiest girl in the whole school. And it was not like guys were not over her all the time. They were. And then she used to treat me like a little sister, and I did not find it disturbing because I was close to her and that made me feel special. I think that was the time when I first started watching porn. I would sometimes imagine her. But still, I was not watching the same-sex porn. It was just a guy and a girl. And even now, a lot of people ask me: "How does the queer sex world feel like? What do you guys do? How does it happen?"

I: How does it work, yeah.

S: And for me, at that time, I had no idea. I would be okay with just holding her hand and stuff. So, I think even about exploring your body or even exploring your partner's body, it's all clouded. I still feel like I'm not very sexual or not sexually active. And that also comes from the guilt that I'm not who my parents wanted me to be. Sometimes sex feels very guilty and not pleasurable. I think in my teenage years, I had zero relationships. I only started dating someone when I was in 11th or 12th grade. I mean like midway 11th-12th. I think that is when I started feeling like: "Oh, I'm not just attracted to men. I feel like I'm attracted to this person." Also because of the narrative of how you should have a boyfriend and not a girlfriend. I think that is also what restricted me so much. I did not feel really safe with men.

So, I changed my school when I was in 8th grade. I did not have any contact with her, that girl I was hardly crushing on.

I: Yeah.

S: Yeah. And then I'm still friends with her on Facebook and I stalk her sometimes, which is so bad. I think that is when I first had my queer crush on a real person. Before that, I was crushing

on female actresses and stuff. And I mean, people obsess over celebrities, so it did not feel like a big deal. But having crush on someone who is real made me feel like it was something different. Which was very scary to be honest because even for me now, my future does not feel very secure because of how the society narrates it, yeah.

I: Sorry, I am a bit distracted by the cats.

S: Oh my god, I think we have three or four cats.

I: Yeah, they're so cute.

S: Oh my god, yeah. They're so friendly.

I: I'm listening to you, but then like, I see them.

S: (Laughs).

I: Was there someone when you had your first real-life crush in your surroundings? Did you tell anyone?

S: No, no, no, of course not. I did not. I think it's different than Kathmandu and the place I'm from because I know that a lot of my queer friends started dating pretty soon. They started dating from 8th grade and they knew about their gender. They knew about their sexual orientation, and they knew more about themselves than I did. Also, maybe because they are younger than me. That could also be the reason. I think, I kind of feel like I was blessed in that sort of way because the younger relationship they had when they were 16 or 14 was very toxic and traumatic for them because they shared with me about their traumas and how they were abused by their partner. In that way, I feel safer, and I feel blessed about it. But I think it was also because of the community that I grew up in. I was not able to express myself fully and I did not find people like me around me. So, I think that might have also been the reason why I was such a late bloomer.

I: Okay.

00:14:41

I: Then later, when you went to 11th and 12th class or even before, did you get to know someone who felt similar? Did you have someone in your surroundings that was also not straight?

S: No.

I: No?

S: I think the reason that I found out about my identity when I was in 11th and 12th grade was also because I was online all the time. I had access to the internet all of the time. So, I was looking to researches, and I was going through the quizzes like how gay are you and stuff (laughs). I think that was my only evaluation of myself if I was even queer or not. Other than that, I don't think I had any real experience with people who were like me. And still now, I think last year was the first Pride that happened in Pokhara. It was nice to see so many young people coming out. I don't know how accepting the parents are because usually in Pokhara the parents are very conservative. And the reason why I moved to Kathmandu was also because I knew how conservative my parents were and I did not want to live there. And I did not want to restrict myself with so many possibilities that I could have explored. I think being queer and my queer identity was also one of the things I explored after I came to Kathmandu.

00:16:44

I: So, when was that? When did you come here?

S: I think I came here back in December 2022.

I: Okay, so it has been....

S: About more than a year or so.

I: More than a year, yeah.

S: Yeah. That is when I first met my boyfriend. We were in the same class. I don't know why this happens but queer relationships happen so quickly. I think it was two weeks of knowing each other that we started dating. I think, one of the reasons why I dated him so quickly was because I felt safe which I did not feel in my previous relationship that I had. Maybe that could be the reason why it happened so quickly.

I: It's actually nice to hear that you just arrived and then you got to know someone so special, so fast.

S: Yeah.

I: And that he became such an important person.

S: Yeah. I think my partner is the one from whom I know so much about queer relationships that young people in Kathmandu have. I know from his friends and from other people how toxic it can be. Because I've heard their experience of getting abused. They were minors when they started dating the person who was in their mid-twenties or so. Since there are not many people that feel safe to come out, so you have limited options of dating people. Sometimes when you are trying to jump into a relationship with someone it can turn toxic very quickly or it can turn harmful.

00:18:50

I: Okay, so I turn a little bit back in time before Kathmandu times. So, like how often for example was marriage a topic or like traditional gender roles in your home?

S: I think it was pretty often to be honest because my mother is obsessed with the concept of marriage. Even before I planned to be in Kathmandu one of the reasons that played a significant role in me shifting to Kathmandu was that I was supposed to get married to a guy who was seven years older than me. One of the reasons why they wanted me to marry that guy was because he was a French Navy. He was settled, he was earning well. So, they were okay with me marrying someone who was seven years older than me that I had not even known for a month or so. After one month into having conversations with him he started talking about how he wants a family which I was not sure of because I am not sure if I want to have kids anytime soon. So, I made it clear to him that I don't want kids: "If the only reason that you want to get married is to have kids, then I don't think I am the best person for you." So, I cut off marriage with him and then I told my parents about it and then I think that is also why they were okay with me because I felt kind of betrayed because he never mentioned about that stuff earlier.

I: But you were considering it actually?

S: Yeah, kind of. I was manipulated into it because marriage is such a big deal especially in South Asian families. He pretended to be very supportive of me studying so I was like, okay, I eventually have to get married, so why not now?

I: How long were you talking to him?

S: Maybe two months.

I: Did you meet him?

S: No, he was in France.

I: How old were you?

S: I was 20.

I: And he?

S: 27.

I: How did you feel when you told your parents that you don't want to? Were you kind of relieved? What did you feel in that moment?

S: I think it did not take me quite long to convince them because they kind of knew that it was a bad match and the way my mother convinced me to get married to him was like: "He has a PR of France so you can get divorced in like two years if you don't think he's good. So, don't worry, we will be okay with you getting divorced." So, I was considering it because of that reason.

I: Yeah, but what's the point then to get married if you can't get divorced?

S: I think apparently the PR because I was actively trying to get out of the country back then.

I: But do you get it so easily like in two years there?

S: Yeah. I think once you get married to someone who is from France especially like being in the Navy, I think it comes with a lot of advantages. So yeah, I think that is also why my parents were considering it. Also, he was the son of my dad's friend.

I: Okay, so I was about to ask how your parents got connected?

S: Yeah, and the friend that he was the son of helped us quite a lot when we were struggling financially so I think it was also the burden that they – I thought they felt like it was their responsibility since they wanted to get him married for quite a long time and I think they thought that it would make their relationship better.

I: But it was not like a deal because they helped you out?

S: I think it was their way of trying to convince me.

I: How do you feel now about it?

S: I feel so glad that I did not get married because I think men in the Navy or like the police force are usually very patriarchal and controlling.

I: Because the whole structural system behind those institutions are very patriarchal.

S: Brutal. Yeah, I'm so happy.

I: Yes, that's good. And maybe there is another option to go to France at some point?

S: Oh my god, I was planning to go to Australia first, so I did my IELTS, and I got good grades then again, then again, it was quite expensive.

I: Yeah, it's very expensive to go to Australia.

S: And I think, that is why they considered that option.

I: But just let me know if you consider Austria.

S: (Laughs). Oh my god, yes.

I: When I tell people that I live in Austria some are so confused and say: "Oh, Australia is so nice." No, Austria.

S: Oh my god. I love Austria.

I: It's beautiful.

S: I know.

I: Is this the mother?

S: This is so chunky. There's a black cat. And they had a baby. They two had a baby. So, the small cat. Yeah.

00:25:13

I: And so, did you have in the two different schools you went to any close friends? Or were you more of a lone wolf so to say?

S: (Laughs). Yeah, I think I remember being bullied a lot. Because I was the only one with my ethnicity in that school, so people bullied me a lot. And I think that also kept me off from other things because I was constantly being bullied. The pressure of getting good grades was already there and patriarchal society, gender roles were already there. So, I think that also kept my mind out of me. I think I was not thinking about myself at that time because a lot of things were going on. Also, like, 10th grade is very important for us and I think the pressure of academics really got to me. Yeah.

I: And because sometimes when it's shuts, it stops. So, at what stage in life did you meet where you feel comfortable around?

S: I'm sorry, what did you say?

I: In what state of your life do you meet people and where you feel comfortable around?

S: Comfortable around? I think after I came to Kathmandu because I found a lot of queer spaces and I found people who were just like me. I think this is where I have felt most comfortable because even in Pokhara, there are no spaces like that. I mean, there are barely spaces. Even if there are, then not many people know about it. I don't remember, I don't think I have any queer friends from Pokhara. I think that is also why I don't connect to people much and I was a big introvert back in middle school. I think I was a big introvert throughout my school journey.

I: Does anyone from your life in Pokhara know about your sexuality?

S: No, not really.

I: Your sister?

S: My sister is bisexual too. I think that is also what brings us closer because she is also bisexual. She has a girlfriend now. She is in 12th grade, and I am so happy for her because when I was in her age, I was questioning myself a lot and I was very insecure about myself. Especially, I think the reason I was very insecure about myself was because men made me feel that way. It was never my insecurities that made me feel like I was anything lesser, but it was men. They would be like: "Oh, you have a big nose. Oh, you are hairy. Oh, you have a moustache." And so, I think that was the reason why I also did not feel very safe. I think there was never any question about my sexuality because I think I look very straight. So, I think that was the reason why people never questioned it. Also, I think being straight was the most common thing and

the controversies that happened in our high school were about who was fucking who and never about who was gay.

I: It was the same when I went to high school.

S: Yeah. I think that is also why it did not feel very important for me but now I think it is an important factor of my life.

00:29:44

I: And let me see. We are actually finished with this part, but so is there anything else you want to tell about your school and teenage years?

S: I'm not really close with any of my friends from Pokhara, also because of my queer identity. Because I think a lot of them would question me, like: "Why are you dating this person"? I thought, like: "Why are you doing this?" I remember this moment that I had recently. I had this close friend when I was in 10th grade, and she got pregnant, teenage pregnancy is not very accepted in Nepali community, but she got pregnant when she was in 11th grade, and she had to quit her college, and then she was raising her son, and everyone was talking about it, and all of our friends were talking about it, and I felt very guilty about not being with her at that time. And I think that also reflects how bad our courses are about sex education, because sex education covers not only about being queer, or safe sex, or abortion, but all other things like menstrual hygiene and stuff, and I think that would have played such an important role in her life, and I think she would not have been in this situation that she's in right now if we had better sex education. And I had this moment where I felt like I should reconnect with her, and ask her about how she's doing, or if I could be of any help. But still, again, I was scared to go up to her, and I was scared if she would ever question me, or about my partner. Because whenever I'll put a story with my partner, and people will comment like, is that a boy or a girl, and that will just stop me or freeze me all of a sudden, because I don't know why it is so important for them to know what gender I'm dating. And I think being queer in Nepal also comes with a lot of fear and insecurity, just about your partner, or just about how your life will be, if you decide to be with your partner for a long term, or if you want to get married, and stuff. Like if you want to adopt a child, a lot of possibilities will end for me if I happen to be with the person I love. Which is very scary, if you ask me.

I: Yeah, I just, I don't know if you know this, this person's name is, I'm going to tell the name, because he is like, open in the media, so his name is Anil, and he must be, I think, around 40-

ish already, but he got married to a German man, and they went in front of court here in Nepal, and they came here, in Nepal, to get this accepted, and they were also planning forward to adopt. Yeah, but still, it doesn't work out.

S: Oh my God.

I: Yeah. And they're living here. There are two good newspaper articles.

S: Okay, so, someone who lives here is a trans woman, and she has been trying to change her, I mean, like, she has almost got everything changed, like gender and stuff, and her legal name to her preferred name now, but I think she has, the only part of it remaining is she has to change her name in school certificate. And it took her two years to get everything done. And when she went to this district administration to get her school certificate changed, they told her to do all the process again, which took her two years. And now it feels like impossible to do everything again. And so, I think that adds on stress to a queer person's life, because they now have to go through all of the stress once again just to be who they are, and while everyone else gets it done easily.

I: That's not fair.

S: Yeah. They have to prove themselves time and again, which is very dreadful.

I: Yeah. Should I stop this?

S: Yeah, we can stop.

Protocol 3

Project: Being PoMSOGIESC+ in Nepal

Interview ID: I8_Shreya_20240822_IA3

Interviewee: Shreya, female, age 22

Duration: 00:23:46

Location, Time: Soul Café, Lazimpat, Kathmandu, 22.08.2024 at 7.30 pm

Type: Interview in person

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interview

Shreya's residence: Patan, Kathmandu Valley

Occupation: Bachelor Student of English Literature and Psychology, Board Member at YUWA

Scheduling and Arrival: Shreya and I scheduled our next meeting via Instagram. Although she lives in Patan, she had been staying in Baluwatar with her uncle for a few days. To make it easier for me, she suggested we meet in Lazimpat since she was already nearby. We agreed to meet at 5.30pm at Soul Café, a Korean restaurant. I arrived on time, but shortly after, I received a message from her saying she would be 30 minutes late. I found a quiet spot in the crowded restaurant and ordered a cool drink, while I was waiting. After 45 minutes, she finally arrived.

Pre-Interview Conversation: When Shreya arrived, we greeted each other warmly with a hug, and she apologized profusely for her delay. We sat across from each other and spent quite some time talking about various topics. Shreya shared stories about her stay at her uncle's house due to a recent festival that honours siblings and family members, her work at YUWA and the current projects there, and the fact that she currently doesn't have university classes, so more free time. About 30 minutes into our conversation, we ordered a light meal and continued to chat, enjoying a long conversation.

Interview Setting and Content: Around 7.00 pm, it started to rain, so we moved to a covered area in the restaurant. It was here that we began our interview. Since we had already covered most topics in previous sessions, only a few remained. I gave her a brief introduction to the topics, and Shreya began to share. She talked about her college years, how she got together with her partner, and her experiences of coming out to some friends and family members. She also explained why she hasn't come out to her parents. The interview lasted just under 25 minutes, covering all the remaining topics, I wanted to discuss.

Post-Interview and Conclusion: After the interview, we stayed at the restaurant for a while longer, finishing our meal and continuing our conversation. Shreya invited me to join her at the

Patan House Café, where she lives, on the upcoming Saturday (August 24th). There was a market, a sample sale for a clothing brand, along with thrift stalls, live music and food. We agreed to meet again on Saturday. As it got late and the rain intensified, I paid the bill and called a taxi for her. We left the restaurant together, and I accompanied her to the taxi. We said goodbye with a warm hug before parting ways.

Transcript 3

Date: 22.08.2024

Duration: 00:23:45

Interviewee: Shreya

Audio File: I8_Shreya_20240822_IA3

I: MS

S: Shreya

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00:05:26 Shreya's first non-hetero relationship

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-

00:00:00

I: I start?

S: Yeah.

I: Here we go.

S: What do I start with?

I: You can talk about your university first.

S: Mhm, okay. I used to study in a private college for my first year. Now I'm in second year and it's a public college. I faced a lot of ... (unintelligible) in this college which I really did not expect. One of our professors is a psychology professor, so he teaches us child adolescence and juvenile delinquency. I was not in the lecture but what he said was asexual people and aromantic people are abnormal. I heard it from one of my classmates. It was so hard to process because

I've heard multiple transphobic comments from him and a lot of homophobic comments. It made me feel so bad. It is so scary to see these people teaching psychology especially. My public college especially is full of very reserved people. They are not open to the concept of being queer. They are not open to the concept of sex being something pleasurable. Especially people who hold a lot of stereotypes and schemas. And it has been especially hard for me after I transferred to this public college, because of those reasons particularly. I think, also another reason could be that we have a lot of old teachers like who have been teaching for 50 years.

I: Yeah, I was just about to ask. How old are your teachers?

S: I mean, most of my teachers particularly are young. By young I mean around 40 or 45 like around my parents' age. But other than that the teachers who teach Nepali or any other subject are around 60 about to retire to be honest. There is that. I mostly see old teachers. It is very patriarchal. It is an all-girls college, and I see really little female teachers. It is very patriarchal. We will get comments about our clothes and our hair and stuff, yeah.

I: Do you have restrictions?

S: We don't really have restrictions, particularly because of the reason that I study humanities. We don't have restrictions on if we have to wear a uniform or not. You can't also show skin, and you cover your skin. Few people get sent home from colleges because they are not covering themselves up completely.

I: What do you have to cover up?

S: Everything.

I: Everything?

S: Yeah. Like you can show your arms and that's it. Can we move on to the next question?

00:03:50

I: Yeah, so can I ask why you decided to study humanities?

S: So, I am really into English literature. The foremost reason why I came to Kathmandu was because I wanted to study English literature. And I was keen about psychology but I was not sure if I wanted to. Later on, I decided that I wanted to study psychology. I had been reading a

lot of psychological books at that time. That is how I decided on studying major English and literature.

I: So, do you like Freud? I live in Vienna, I have to ask.

S: Oh my god (laughs). I am not a fan.

I: That's another debate.

S: Oh my god, that's a big debate. I'm sorry.

I: I was asking why you decided to study humanities.

S: The reason I decided on this particular subject was because I thought I could exercise more freedom, it would be something that I would love doing. I can see myself being an English teacher, English professor or psychologist, so like I wanted to go with these subjects. So, yeah. I think, I also saw a lot of scope in this subject particularly. That is the reason why I did it. Yeah.

00:05:26

I: You told me the last time that you got to know your current partner in your first semester.

S: Yeah.

I: Can you tell me a little bit more about this if you want?

S: Yeah. So, I got to know my partner from my previous college, the private college that I used to study in. One of the reasons why I transferred was because my principal had a big problem with me. He was bitching about me with my teachers. I thought that was very low. Then I decided to transfer to this public school. I had to pay one tenth of what I was paying before. How I met my partner was he was also studying the same subject as me. He was studying psychology and social work. We had a workshop on the first week of college. And then we were teamed up in the same group. That is how we started talking. I asked him out for a movie (laughs). I think we went to watch Avatar 2.

I: Ah, I haven't watched it yet.

S: Oh my god, it is nice. I think that is how we met at first. At first, I really had no idea about his sexuality. It did not matter to me at first. He used to wear his mask all the time. He used to

cover his face. He used to wear a hoodie. It did not matter much. I think it was after we started dating for a week or so that I knew about his sexuality, his gender identity and stuff, yeah.

I: And what were you thinking when you found out? Anything specific? Or was it just like okay?

S: I already knew about my sexual orientation. And like it would not have mattered. It still does not. I was not surprised. I think, that I was happy and relieved. I have had so many triggering and bad experiences with men, so it felt better.

I: That is nice to hear.

S: (Laughs).

I: Yeah, so that was one and a half years ago, right?

S: Yeah.

I: And since then you are together.

S: Yeah, yeah. I think it was hard, especially after we started dating for six months. It was hard because of his habits. He used to get drunk on a random Tuesday night or so. And then his parents were really strict and he got into problems many times. Especially that time, it was really hard. Because I had to deal with extra burden because of him. But then later, I told him about it. I confessed and then he actually started effort on getting better.

I: How are things now? May I ask what kind of relationship are you in? Is it open, is it closed, is it monogamous?

S: It is a closed relationship. I mean like I do meet people, but I am not seeing anyone romantically. I know that this is the person I want to end up probably or get married to. Yeah, that is there. And this is my first queer relationship, and we started dating pretty quick (laughs). But I don't regret this thing.

I: Isn't it like also a characteristic of queer dating? Everything goes like this.

S: Yeah. I think the reason it happens is because you are comfortable with your partner and that is why. And most of the times I have dated men, I have not felt comfortable. They will point

out some things about you and make you feel insecure. I think that is also why the queer relationship moves on so fast. And ends so fast.

I: Yes. I mean, I am in a heterosexual relationship right now. But I had left so many stereotypes before in my head. I was actually kind of afraid of men. That is why I did not want to date men. This kind of happened because I got to know my boyfriend and first kind of thought he is gay.

S: (laughs).

I: I did not know that we were dating at first.

S: Oh my god.

I: I don't know. I trusted him on another level. This is how it happened. So, I kind of understand that being in a queer relationship or not with a cis man is kind of... I don't know relieving or safe-ish?

00:11:40

I: And when was the first time you told anyone about your sexuality?

S: I think it was when I was in 11th grade. The first person that I told about my sexuality was my boyfriend back then. And then I used to make fun of it a lot. I used to tease him. I used to say: "Oh my god, I like your sister more than you." But the thing is, he was not jealous of it. He accepted me, so it was not that bad.

I: So, his reaction was positive?

S: Yes.

I: And you told your sister?

S: Yes.

I: What did your sister say?

S: I think she always knew. And she told me that she always knew it that I was queer. Also, she is bisexual, too. So yeah, that makes sense. She also had a positive reaction. I think most of the people that I have told this used to have had a positive reaction. And also, the reason it might have happened would also be because I am really selective of it like to who I want to open up

about. So, I think that is why it has always been a positive reaction. I cannot remember having a negative or unexpected reaction from anyone. But in some spaces where I had to mention my identity, I have felt the shift in their response. Like to before, when they knew I was queer. I have felt that way, but I don't think I have felt it with my friends who I have come out to about.

I: Why did you decide to tell your boyfriend in 11th grade, your sister, and also selected friends? What was your reason behind?

S: I think the reason why I felt like I had to say it was, I was comfortable with it. I mean, at that time, I felt more comfortable in my identity. Else, I think I would have preferred not talking about it so openly. But the selected people were open about the thoughts of being queer. And they really loved me. And I felt very supported. I think that is the only reason why I decided to open up about it and talk about it. I think it made me feel closer to them, yeah.

I: Do you think it also contributed to being yourself? To lift your identity? That you opened up to some people?

S: Yeah, I think it was more about – I think it was relieving. The whole thing about coming out was very relieving. I had been keeping this big secret for so long. And I felt like I should really tell them if I am so sure about my identity. I should really tell people around me or people that I love that this is who I am. And maybe I think, I also wanted to see their reaction to it. I was interested about how they would react. And I cannot remember a person who has not had a positive reaction. I mean, I have had some people comment or question me about my gender through stories and stuff, questioning me if I am dating a girl or a boy. And so, I think that is also why I only told these selected people and not others. And every time I put on a story, there is this fear that they are going to judge me on the basis of it. So, there is that.

I: Do you think that you can overcome this fear at some point? Or do you think that the person's reaction should be changed so that you don't feel the fear anymore?

S: I think how I decided on this conclusion was because of the conversations I have had with these people. And I really don't see them changing their narrative. Soon enough for me to come out, maybe in 30 years they will change their narrative but until then I am really scared of it. I mean, I would be married before 30 years, so eventually they will find out. But I rather prefer it to be later than earlier, like right now.

00:17:49

I: Why do you think it is so difficult in Nepali society to come out?

S: I think it is not just Nepali society to be honest. I think it is more of Asia. There is this whole big taboo about being queer. And I think the dating culture in Asia is not as open as Western dating cultures. And there are literally no dating spaces for young people. And your children dating someone, their gender is such an alienated concept for parents. And I think that is also why it is such a big deal for parents because they want their children to fit in in society. They want them to be respectable. I think they prefer their children to be doctors rather than be gay.

I: So, what do you think has to change for just people living their true identity?

S: I think Nepalese people really have to learn more about their history. Since a lot of Nepalese people are Hindu and they really don't know about their Hindu history. We have a lot of queer representation in our Hindu culture, in our religion. And just because of some scenarios or because of colonization, people decided to accept like – they have this selective perspective of learning from history. And they have decided on what they want to believe and what they do not want to. And I think a lot of narrative has changed to what it was before. Even about menstruation and about abortion and stuff. At first, the reason why women did not work in their menstruation was because they would bleed a lot and wild animals might get attracted to them. And they literally changed the narrative into girls not being pure and other So, I think being queer is similar to that. And I think it is not something impossible, but I think it is going to take a lot of time for people to accept it, yeah.

I: Yeah, I see that as well. So, it is nothing that will happen like that. Same with climate change and environment So, that you can teach people, but still there are so many out there who are ignorant.

S: Yeah, ignorant.

I: Like I am just one person. Nothing will happen if I do this and that.

S: Yeah.

I: With my huge car, driving around.

S: Yeah. I mean like I see so many young people my age being homophobic. And those are the people who will grow up as someone's parents or some queer kid's parents. And that is how this narrative continues.

I: Yes, over generations. Yeah.

S: Which is pretty sad.

I: Yes. You have lots of responsibilities if you have children and if you try to socialize them and teach them life lessons.

S: I don't want to fuck up my children, but someone else will.

I: I don't want my children to go to therapy because of me.

S: Me neither. I think the most prevalent reason that young people go to therapy is also because of generational trauma because of how traumatic childhood they have had. And especially in Nepal, they have this perception that you just have babies and they just grow up. You don't have to pay attention to them. You just need to have a baby first. Which is so fucked up because most of us grew up without having our parents around us. And I think that is also why we had such a bad childhood, because most of us face sexual assaults and stuff just because our parents were not around them. And we really did not know about bad touch, good touch, yeah.

I: Yeah, I mean it's important actually when you grow up to, in my opinion, that you are being looked after. And that you feel that someone is out there who cares that you can talk to, that you have a genuine connection to your parents. Or to at least some other people in your closer circle.

S: Yeah.

I: Do you want to say, do you have anything else to say?

S: I don't know. Can I see this?

I: Yeah, it's like more questions, but we talked about many of those in other sessions already. But I mean it's not the last time that we are going to talk.

S: I think the music is too distracting (laughs).

I: We can also make just a cut here.

Observation Protocols

Protocol: Drag Show -2 for Visibility

Objective: My objective in attending this event was to gain initial impressions of the queer community, as I was not familiar with it. I was also curious about what a Nepali drag show would be like, as I had never attended one before. I wanted to observe and understand the dynamics of drag performance events within the Kathmandu PoMSOGIESC+ scene, focusing on participation, audience interaction, and cultural expressions. This could have also provided an opportunity to connect with people who could be helpful for my project. Additionally, I wanted to make my presence known; the more events I attend and queer friendly places I hang out, the more people in the PoMSOGIESC+ community will get used to seeing me.

Date and Time: Evening of June 21st, 2024, 6.00 pm.

Location: Hard Rock Café Kathmandu, Durbar Marg, City center of Kathmandu.

Context: The event was part of a broader Pride Month initiative to increase visibility and support for the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Nepal, organized and financed by organizations like Save the Children, Plan International Nepal and the Blue Diamond Society.

Arrival and Setting: I left for the event around 5.20 pm and arrived at the venue at approximately 5.50 pm. I came alone and initially felt a bit uneasy. Upon arrival, I took the elevator up to the restaurant. The restaurant was very large and modern, with both indoor areas and a rooftop terrace. The venue was well-decorated, with a mix of contemporary (balloons) and traditional Nepali elements (marigold flower chains). There were little pride flags and more balloons on every table.

Registration: At the entrance, I had to register with my name, age, phone number, gender, and institution. This process was quick and straight forward.

Initial Observation: I sat at the bar and ordered a beer. From there, I had a good view of the stage and the overall event. Most tables were reserved for organizations/institutions such as the US Embassy, Save the Children, Plan International Nepal, Kathmandu Post, Blue Diamond Society, etc. The room gradually filled up.

Participants and Audience: The audience was very diverse, primarily Nepali individuals, but also some foreigners, mostly seated at the tables of the organizations and embassies. The

audience comprised a mix of cisgender, transgender and other gender/sexual oriented individuals as far as I could tell. I refrained from making assumptions about gender and sexuality based on appearance alone. So, I could not quite judge how the audience was made up, because I cannot draw any clear conclusions from external appearances alone about someone's gender and sexuality. I am aware of that. Notable attendees of the show included Nepal wide famous trans women such as Miss Pink Nepal 2016, Miss Universe Trans, and Sarosy Neupane, a well-known trans public figure and PoMSOGIESC+ activist. She has held titles such as Miss Diamond 2021, Miss Supranational Nepal 2023 and Miss Pink 2024.

Key Program Points of the Evening:

1. Performance by Sarosy Neupane: She performed the opening show with three other male presenting individuals. The performance was energetic and set the tone for the evening.
2. Introduction of the Judges: Annie Lama (Transgender Woman, Miss Pink Nepal 2016), Anish Tamang Divinish (one of Nepal's well-known body painter and makeup artists), Sophia Bhujel (a well-known Nepali model, Miss Universe 2022, project manager of Project Red, and ally of the PoMSOGIESC+ community) were introduced by their names, professions, looks and what they are looking most forward to that evening.
3. Singing Act by Piroo Rana: Before the drag queens performed, Piroo Rana, a well-known Nepali homosexual singer, took the stage, said a few words, which I sadly did not understand, because she spoke very quietly. After that, she performed one of her songs.
4. First Part of Drag performances: The competing drag queens were Shine, Queen of Lady, MomoLicca, Kohinur, and Angelina Amber. The first contest involved creating costumes on the theme of environmental pollution, environmental protection, and climate change. Shine, Queen of Lady, Kohinur, and Angelina Amber made outfits from collected trash. Unfortunately, she spoke so quickly in Nepali and the crowd cheered so loudly that I could not understand their comments on their outfits, but it seemed they were raising awareness on these topics. A standout performance was by MomoLicca, who dressed as a trekking tourist with hiking pants, an outdoor jacket, a trekking backpack, platform high heels, and a gold-studded glittery bra under the jacket. They introduced themselves with, "Hi, I'm MomoLicca. Like Momo, I'm cheap, tasty, and easy to get." The audience laughed and applauded. They pulled a muesli/chocolate bar from the backpack, pretended to throw

the wrapper on the ground, but then held up a finger to indicate “no” and put the trash in a garbage bag from the backpack, smiled, and exited the stage energetically.

5. Hijra’s arrival: Around this time, when the drag queens performed their self-made outfits, a group of 20-30 Hijras arrived. They spread out, started dancing, and took photos and videos with guest. The atmosphere changed noticeably, though not negatively, but it felt different. They drew the attention away from the stage to them. Not only were Hijras in saris present, but also some in traditional Bakhu (a traditional garment of Buddhist ethnicities), which I had never seen before – very intriguing! They left after about 30-40 minutes.
6. Second Part of Drag Performances: After that, they performed a lip-sync battle. The dance and lip-sync performances by the drag queens differed from those in Austria, as most performed (partially traditional) Nepali songs. Some of the drag queens also wore traditional Nepali women’s attire (sari-like).
7. Bharatnatyam Dance: Additionally, a male-presenting individual performed Bharatnatyam (a classical Indian dance style), which was fascinating and impressive to watch.

Interaction with Sajal: Later in the evening, a trans woman approached me. She was dressed in red, with long black wavy hair, makeup that highlighted her eyes, and red lips. She moved very elegantly and almost sensually. She hugged me and said, “Hi I’m Sajal, I just wanted to touch you, bye,” and disappeared as quickly as she had appeared. It was a surprising, unexpected but positive encounter.

Conversation with an Ally: I also spoke with the woman who was sitting next to me at the bar. Her name was Manu. She was not part of the community but an ally, and her NGO, Eco Sathi Nepal financially supported the event. She was also attending the event alone, and I felt more comfortable in her presence.

Meeting a Deaf Homosexual Man: She later conversed with a deaf homosexual young man (via phone notes), as they were both dentists. I also had a brief chat with him. He was Vietnamese and visiting Nepal from Stockholm, where he lives and works. He was with two deaf Nepalis, whom I did not interact with but later found on Instagram that evening, as they are very active in the queer scene in Kathmandu.

Conclusion: I left the event around 9.00 pm. Once home, I searched for and followed some of the attendees and performers on social media to stay updated.

Overall Atmosphere: Throughout the evening, there was a lot of applause, cheering, dancing, and an overall lively, joyful atmosphere in my opinion.

Follow-Up: I plan to reach out to some of the participants for further interviews and interactions to deepen my understanding of the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Kathmandu Valley.

Challenges: The loud environment made it difficult to understand some of the performances and interactions. Additionally, I felt initial discomfort attending the event alone, which gradually eased as I engaged with others.

Reflections: This event provided valuable insights into the expressions and dynamics of the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Kathmandu. Their performances and interactions highlighted the vibrant culture and the ongoing challenges faced by the community.

Protocol: Open Mic, Open Heart, Open Mind

Objective: My objective was to engage with and understand the mental health concerns and difficulties of queer individuals in Nepal, build connections within the local PoMSOGIESC+ community, and gather qualitative data for my research on the social dynamics and support systems within the community.

Date and Time: June 22nd, 2024, 11.00 am.

Location: Tara House, Lalitpur, Kathmandu Valley.

Context: The event “Open Mic, Open Heart, Open Mind” was organized by Global Shapers Kathmandu and Nepal Mental Health to address mental health issues within the queer community. Registration was required via Google Forms, either as an attendee or a performer.

Introduction to Venue: The event took place in a newly renovated house with a large courtyard, garden, and a spacious room with high windows. The room featured a Pride flag, plants, and seating arrangements on carpets.

Arrival and Initial Interactions: I arrived around 10.45 am. I was friendly welcomed by the organizers and had to sign the registration form. Gaurav and Shuby approached me as soon as I entered the venue. Both recognized me from the previous evening’s drag show at Hard Rock Café. Gaurav is a queer activist engaged with Global Shapers Kathmandu. Shuby is a non-binary poet and drag performer as well as the co-founder of Queer Honky-Tonk.

Event Commencement and Attendees: The event started at 11.30 am. A diverse group of 20-25 persons including young individuals (18-30 years old) and a few older participants (50-60 years old), who appeared to be relatives of some performers were attending. A non-binary person welcomed everyone and outlined the event’s focus on mental health and the challenges by queer individuals in accessing psychological support in Kathmandu Valley. They mentioned the website of Nepal Mental Health and its support options for queer individuals. Then colorful flowers were distributed to everyone.

Performances and Presentations:

1. A young woman named Ashita sang a song accompanied by guitar.
2. A young woman whose name I forgot recited a poem she had written after her last panic attack.

3. Shuby then presented on the history of Pride flags and displayed various flags, some self-made.
4. Gaurav briefly introduced Global Shapers Kathmandu's work.
5. A well-known Nepali singer named Piroo Rana performed two songs, which were deeply moving.
6. A young male actor and poet recited an amusing poem about alcohol, followed by another abstract poem later, and promoted his theatre group, Moksana.
7. Then another young man performed a song he has written by himself accompanied by guitar.
8. A Cali.Nepal Representative promoted free calisthenics classes open to all and demonstrated some typical exercises.
9. Shuby went on the stage again and performed a short drag performance to an emotional English song.

Break and Informal Interactions: Half time through the performances we did a small break about 20 min. Orange, mango juice as well as lemonade and chips were served in the courtyard. I also had a short conversation with a young male presenting person who asked me about my tattoos. We had huge language barriers though.

Event Ending: At the end, the entire Global Shapers Kathmandu group sang a Justin Bieber song together. After that, we all took a group photo together, raising our flowers up high. As everything came to an end and people stood up, walking outside, I approached Piroo Rana and asked her how I could follow her on Spotify and Instagram, we exchanged handles. Then I approached Shuby again and received some recommendations about queer-friendly cafés and bars.

Also Ashita approached me asking about my tattoos. We had a bit small talk and then she had to leave. Before that we exchanged Instagram handles.

Overall Impressions and Conclusion: The event provided valuable insights into the mental health challenges faced by queer individuals and offered opportunities to build meaningful connections within the community. The event was a significant step towards understanding the intersection of mental health and queer identities in Nepal. It also facilitated networking with key figures and potential participants for further research and collaboration.

Protocol: Queering the Bond

Objective: My objective in attending this event was to engage with the queer community in Kathmandu and gain deeper insight into their dynamics. Furthermore, I wanted to build connections with people from the PoMSOGIESC+ community, which could potentially lead to further interviews. I also want to build rapport and trust within the community, making future interactions and interviews more comfortable and productive and this can also be achieved by taking part myself, sharing my own experiences and background, fostering mutual understanding and empathy. Regarding event-related objectives, I aimed to observe how members of the community interact, support each other and express their identities in a safe space created for them. I also wanted to understand the impact of such events on the participants, particularly in terms of empowerment, visibility and solidarity.

Date and Time: Afternoon of June 30st, 2024, 4.00 pm.

Location: Basantapur, Kathmandu.

Context: The event was part of the “Metamorphosis” exhibition by kaalo.101, a queer-feminist, antifascist art collective. “Queering the Bond” was a networking event aimed at fostering connections within the queer community. It was exclusively for queer individuals and featured various activities to encourage interaction and bonding to getting to know each other. The event was organized by Queering the Bond – an initiative for queer people to connect – in collaboration with kaalo.101.

Pre-Event Registration: I discovered the event through Instagram and registered via a Google Docs link. Participants were required to identify as queer. Post-registration, we received coordinates for the event to ensure exclusivity and maintain a safe space free from uninvited guests.

Arrival and Setting: I arrived at 4.50 pm. After wandering around for a bit, I found the venue, which was a small courtyard surrounded by tightly packed Newari-style residential buildings. The ground was covered with woven rattan mats and carpets where people sat in small groups. There were water and chang (traditional Nepali fermented drink) canisters available with a free donation system. The event was taking place in the exhibition hall of Metamorphosis. It was quite dark due to the walls being colored black. Three walls were adorned with brightly colored artworks illuminated by spotlights. At the far end of the room, in the left corner, was an installation on the floor featuring a colorful handwoven carpet, showing three skulls surrounded

by bricks placed in a circle. With various graphics and graffiti hanging above. In the right corner, a DJ booth was set up, playing pop, hip-hop and rap music.

Initial Interaction: Upon arrival, I noticed approximately 20 individuals grouped into 5-6 clusters. I approached Shuby, one of the organizers, who greeted me warmly and we exchanged brief pleasantries.

Event Proceedings:

- 4.00 pm: Shuby announced for everyone to gather in the exhibition hall, though it took some time for the participants to move inside.
- 4.15 pm: Around 10 participants, mostly female presenting, had gathered in the room. Shuby and another organizer, Birat, distributed name tags and markers, asking us to write our names and pronouns on the tags and stick them on our clothing.
- 4.20 pm: The first icebreaker activity started. Birat instructed us to form two groups of five people each line up according to our birth month without speaking. My group completed the task faster than the other group.
- 4.30 pm: The second icebreaker involved forming a circle and creating a story one word at a time, starting with “Once upon a time”. This activity caused a lot of laughter as the story quickly became nonsensical.
- 4.35 pm: By that time, the group had grown to about 15-20 people, including more male presenting individuals than before. We repeated the story game, this time using full sentences, with the storyline involving various queer themes such as different sexualities and relationship types.
- 4.45 pm: We started another activity with approximately 25 participants now present. We dispersed around the room, and Birat posed questions that we had to answer to the person standing opposite us.
 - The first question was, “if you were a brand/business, what would be your slogan?” I paired up with a non-binary individual who envisioned a rock fashion brand with a corresponding slogan. This person wore baggy, dark clothing, including $\frac{3}{4}$ jeans, an oversized black shirt with a graphic print, chunky black boots, glasses and had a dark brown/black mullet haircut adorned with multiple earrings, necklaces, rings, and bracelets.
 - The second question was “DC or Marvel?” but it was quickly dropped as few had opinions on it.

- The third question asked about our favorite childhood game/activity. I spoke to a young Chinese woman currently in Nepal for an internship but residing and studying in the US. I shared my experiences of playing outdoors, climbing trees, and wandering through vineyards, while she reminisced about playing with water and apples in a small tub her grandmother always set up during hot days in China.
- Subsequently, the question of dining with a famous personality arose. In a group of three, I humorously suggested dining with a notorious politician like Putin or Trump to spill red wine on them, which made the others laugh.
- The next question was to discuss our childhood and teenage years, sharing our experiences as queer individuals in the places we grew up and where we currently live. I was paired with a male presenting person who identifies as bisexual. They shared that during their teenage years in school, they realized they were attracted to both boys and girls. Although they have only had sexual interactions with men so far, they feel equally attracted to women. They mentioned that they initially struggled to accept this about themselves because they were aware of the societal expectations to marry, have children, take care of their parents, and conform to heteronormative gender roles. They have not officially come out but said it doesn't matter since their parents accept and love them unconditionally.
- The final question was about our professions. I remained with the same person from earlier. They studied interior design. The person, I was discussing the first question with, joined, and they studied computer science and also an environmental studies student joined us. They were interested in my tattoos and my work as a tattoo artist, and we exchanged Instagram handles.
- 5.30 pm: The event transitioned to an open mic session. Two individuals (one male presenting and one female presenting) recited poems, another male presenting person told jokes and a female presenting person rapped. The open mic session ended around 6.00 pm.

Post-Event Interactions and Happenings: I went outside to the courtyard and sat next to two people I had briefly interacted with during the event. By chance, I met Dhirendra, who was also attending the event with some of his friends. We connected through a mutual acquaintance. Dhirendra and I chatted for about 30 minutes. He shared his experiences living in Berlin for an art residency and his upcoming job at a prominent museum in Boudha. He was also learning

German at the Goethe Zentrum. Our conversation revealed several common interests and experiences fostering a sense of rapport. We agreed to stay in touch via WhatsApp and planned to meet again soon. I left the event around 6.15 pm before the concerts and the drag show began, reflecting on the positive atmosphere and the meaningful interactions I had.

Reflections: The event was well-organized and provided a safe space for queer individuals to connect and express themselves. Despite feeling slightly out of place initially due to being the only white person attending, the icebreakers and interactive activities facilitated engagement. The overall experience was enriching and insightful for my research. The open mic session highlighted the diverse talents within the community. Meeting Dhirendra and other participants was particularly valuable for my research and personal connections within the community.

Protocol: Discussion on “Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes”

Objective: My objective was to participate in a discussion on homophobia and stereotypes within the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Nepal, observe group dynamics, and explore potential connections for my research on how queer individuals navigate societal and family expectations in a heteronormative, patriarchal context.

Date and Time: July 2nd, 2024, 2.00 pm.

Location: YUWA Office, Lazimpat, Kathmandu Valley.

Context: The event “Generalized Homophobia and Stereotypes” was organized by YUWA. YUWA is a youth-led organization established in 2009, focusing on empowering youth through advocacy and promoting youth participation in decision-making processes. The organization works on issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, active citizenship, and youth studies.

Arrival and Setup: I arrived at 1.55 pm, the event started at 2.00 pm. Approximately 10 individuals, all identifying as queer and younger than myself took part. Participants included two transgender men, bisexual women, a non-binary person and young gay men. The discussion took place in a room where the participants sat on the floor around a low table with water. A projector was set up to show videos. The discussion was led by Shreya, with her partner (one of the transgender men) who was responsible for photo documentation.

Registration and Introduction: In the beginning the participants were asked to fill out a registration form with personal details including name, pronouns, email, phone number, place of residence, ethnicity, and age. This form revealed that I was the oldest person attending. Then we were asked to introduce ourselves, sharing our names and what we do in life. The group included law students who told they studied law because that is the only chance for changes in Nepali society, persons working for BDS, etc.

Video Presentation: We continued with watching two videos on YouTube. The first was an introduction video of YUWA and the second one was another video featuring queer YUWA staff who critically discussed queer representation in Nepali film and television.

Discussion: The key topics at first were: “How does/can education help to dissolve homophobia?”

“What kind of discrimination have you faced regarding your sexuality and gender?”

Many shared that they haven't come out to their parents because they know their parents have specific expectations and ideals that they wouldn't meet if they revealed and lived their true sexual identity. For example, parents often expect them to marry and have children as part of an ideal future family. If they don't fulfil these expectations, their parents might be shocked, dismiss them or think it's just a phase they go through and not take them seriously. They told that this is because their parents were raised within patriarchal, heteronormative structures that have shaped and ingrained their beliefs and attitudes, which they then project onto their children.

Midway through the discussion, sweet black tea and cookies were served.

Notable Contribution: Shreya shared that she is only out to a few close friends and not to her parents. She fears that if she came out as bisexual, her parents would see her as “abnormal” or even “evil”. She expressed a deep fear of disappointing her parents, especially her mother, and feels she must hide her true identity to maintain her family's acceptance. One statement of her was: “I am my mother's daughter, but if I come out as bisexual, I become the devil in her eyes and fail to meet her expectations. I am afraid of my mother.” This personal revelation had a profound impact on me, resonating deeply and leaving me with much to reflect on.

Post-Event Reflections:

- Emotional Impact: Shreya's story, along with the other participants' experiences, highlighted the intense pressure queer individuals in Nepal face from their families and society at large. The fear of rejection and the need to conform to heteronormative expectations were recurring themes.
- Next Steps: I am considering reaching out to Shreya for a potential interview as part of my research project, given her openness and the depth of her insights.

Conclusion: The discussion provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of queer individuals in Nepal, particularly regarding the internal and external conflicts they face in reconciling their identities with societal and familial expectations. The event also presented an opportunity to connect with potential participants for my research and further explore the themes of mental health, stigma, and identity within the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Nepal.

Protocol: The Prides Palette: A Night to Remember

Objective: My objective was to observe and engage with the PoMSOGIESC+ community in Kathmandu, gain insights into the creative expressions of queer individuals, and support Ajit, one of my research participants, who was performing at the event.

Date and Time: August 23rd, 2024, 6.00 pm.

Location: 10x Thamel, Kathmandu

Context: The event was organized by the Gehendra Dhimal Foundation, with support from the US Embassy in Kathmandu and IM Swedish Development Partner. The Gehendra Dhimal Foundation, established in 2020, was created to honor the legacy of Gehendra Dhimal, a prominent figure in the Nepali and Indian film industries. The foundation aims to empower communities by promoting artistic expression and creativity through comprehensive training, workshops, and various cultural initiatives. Under the leadership of Gautam Dhimal, Gehendra's son, the foundation supports artists, organizes exhibitions, and fosters an inclusive environment that celebrates and nurtures talent.

Arrival, Venue and Initial Impressions: I arrived at the venue, 10x Thamel, a huge nightclub in Thamel, which is Kathmandu's tourist and night-out center just before 6.00 pm. The event was by invitation only, and I was able to attend as Ajit's guest, who had kindly added me to the guest list as his +1- Upon arrival, I checked in at the reception, where my name was ticked off the list, and I was handed a booklet about the Gehendra Dhimal Foundation along with a poetry collection that included the evening's poems in both Nepali and English. The nightclub had been transformed into an intimate performance space. As I entered through the entrance door, I came right into the dance floor area where two tables and four barstools were standing, occupied by the photographers and a film crew. The room's layout was striking, with three floors offering a view of the stage, giving the space an open and lively atmosphere. I made my way to the first floor, where the bar was, and some sofas provided comfortable seating. It was here that I encountered familiar faces: Niranjana, Shuby, and Aahan. Niranjana greeted me warmly with a hug and invited me to join their group. We exchanged pleasantries, and I was introduced to a new acquaintance, Bikram, a friend of Niranjana's visiting from Australia. Bikram and I had a brief conversation about my project in Nepal, and he shared that although he has lived in Australia his whole life, he is originally from Nepal. This initial interaction helped to set a friendly and welcoming tone for the evening. Niranjana also introduced me to

Rosa, a current intern at the German Embassy. We connected and discussed our experiences in Nepal throughout the whole evening.

The Program: At 6.15 pm, the event officially commenced with a speech from Gautam Dhimal, the chairman of the Gehendra Dhimal Foundation. He welcomed the guests and provided an overview of the event, highlighting the importance of creating spaces for queer voices in Nepal. The poetry performances began at 6.20 pm, featuring a series of self-composed poems by both queer and non-queer individuals of all ages. These poems were performed either in Nepali or in English, accompanied by live music. The musicians played a variety of instruments, including guitar, drums, mouth harp, and keyboard, depending on the atmosphere and mood of each poem. A singer sat beside the poets on stage, subtly harmonizing with each performance, adding depth to the emotional atmosphere. As Ajit's performance came to happen, I positioned myself where I could film him, as he had requested. His turn came at 7.00 pm, and he recited a heartfelt poem in English about his sister, emphasizing her significance in his life. It was clear that he was nervous throughout his performance, but the emotion in his voice was palpable, and his words resonated deeply with me, giving me goosebumps. Throughout the evening, other poets explored themes such as their queerness, toxic masculinity, and the challenges of navigating in Nepalese society as an independent (queer) individual. The performances were powerful and moving, and the intimate setting of the venue only heightened the impact of the words and music.

Post-Event Interactions: The event concluded around 7.45 pm with a closing speech by Gautam Dhimal, who expressed his gratitude to all the participants and audience members. A representative from the US Embassy, who is also a well-known queer figure here, presented each performer with a framed certificate and an envelope, acknowledging their contributions to the event. After the performances, Ajit, visibly excited and pleased with his performance, approached me. He hugged me, thanking me repeatedly for attending and supporting him. We talked briefly about how his performance went, and he expressed his gratitude and affection several times, telling me how much he appreciated our connection. As the evening progressed, I had more interactions with others, including Anil and Thomas, a couple who have been advocating for the recognition of their marriage in Nepal. I had read about their efforts in newspaper articles and was excited to meet them in person. Around 8.15 pm, Shuby came over to say goodbye and suggested that we hang out sometime in the future, which I was pleased to hear. Shortly after, Anil and Thomas also said their goodbyes and Anil and I agreed to stay in touch via WhatsApp. By 8.30 pm, Rosa and I decided to leave as well, even though Ajit and

Aahan invited us to go to Pink Tiffany's – the only gay bar in Kathmandu. I bid a heartfelt farewell to Ajit, who reiterated his happiness about our friendship and insisted that we meet again the following day before he returned to Nepalgunj on Sunday. We agreed to catch up the next day at the Saturday market at Patan House Café. Then, Rosa and I left the venue together.

Reflections: The event was not only an opportunity to support Ajit but also a chance to deepen my understanding of the creative expressions within Kathmandu's PoMSOGIESC+ community. The performances were a powerful testament to the resilience and artistry of queer individuals in Nepal, and the connections I made throughout the evening will be valuable for my ongoing research and personal relationships to people here.