CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

The current study is aimed at exploring experiences of growing up through childhood, adolescence and young adulthood of young lesbian and gay persons in urban India. In this study I have tried to understand individual experiences and processes of growing up and development and maintenance of same-sex sexual identity. While studying these processes, I have explored the role of family, peers, romantic relationships, educational institutions, queer communities in shaping the gay or lesbian identity. I have attempted to locate these individual narratives of ‘growing up’ and ‘becoming’ gay/lesbian within the socio-political and historical context within which these lives and journeys have unfolded. In this sense this study has been informed by a life course perspective.

Applying principles of life span development to lives of lesbian and gay individuals, Savin-Williams (2001) has proposed four significant propositions that I have used as guiding principles in this study:

a) We are the same – implying that there are several general characteristics and developmental processes in the lives of sexual minority individuals that are similar to those affecting all humans. For instance, regardless of sexual orientation, all adolescents have growth spurts, menses, nocturnal emissions, acne and all of them have to negotiate issues of autonomy, individuation, attachment, intimacy and identity

b) We are different – implying that due to a marginalised sexuality, sexual minority individuals experience a substantially different life course than do heterosexuals. Experiences of stigma and discrimination and an accompanying sense of alienation affects the childhood, adolescence, adulthood and entire life experiences of gay and lesbian individuals. In fact the ‘social schedule’ as described by Neugarten (1970) of expectable life transitions is informed by ideas of heteronormativity and lesbian and gay individuals are often ‘off schedule’ by default.

c) We differ among ourselves – there exist enormous diversities among gay and lesbian individuals. Sexuality is one aspect of an individual’s identity and it intersects with several other identities such as class, caste, gender, urban/rural background to produce a range of diversities, not to mention diversities around sexual desires, practices, sub-cultures, language and so on.

d) We are each unique – implying that every individual is unique and while there may be similarities of experiences and similar articulations about growing up experiences, no two individuals are identical and any research using a development frame has to be aware of the same
While all these propositions inform the conceptualization and analysis of this study, I have primarily focused on the second proposition i.e. understanding ways in which being gay/lesbian is different and how it impacts growing up and life experiences. In other words, are there experiences that gay children or adolescents have that are different from their heterosexual counterparts? Thus while the theoretical frameworks that I use in this study conceptualize identity and selfhood as constituting of multiple dimensions, I have kept a sharp focus on sexual identity and meaning/s of growing up and living as gay. This is not to undermine the role of other identity markers such as class, caste, religion, region, ability and disability in experiences of growing up. It is only to ‘freeze the frame’ or define the scope of the study that I chose to study one dimension of identity i.e. gay/lesbian identity. It would be interesting to explore at a later stage the intersections between class, caste, sexuality, region and so on. However, currently I seek to visibilise gay childhood/s, adolescence and young adulthood about which we know so little in the Indian context. Since I study here life stories of gay men and lesbian women, the intimate intersections of gender and sexuality are explicating throughout the thesis. Other intersections, such as sexuality and socio-economic class have been described when they have emerged in the data for instance class is inextricably linked with access to privacy that is so important while growing up, especially for someone with gender transgressions who would need privacy for exploring one’s preferred gender expression through trying on clothes, make up, other accessories etc. Similarly socio-economic class is a significant factor in a person being able to leave natal home and live independently. However these intersections, while have been noted are not the focus of this inquiry.

Experiences of gay children and adolescents in this research are being studied with the backdrop of two important considerations. One, under the influence of heteronormativity and the notion of gender binary, studies focused on children and adolescents in India assume all of them to be conforming to the socially assigned gender and expect all of them to grow up to be heterosexual adults. As a result, there exists no literature on children and adolescents, who transgress norms of gender and sexuality. Similarly, since sexuality is expected to emerge in adolescence, even the sparse literature that exists on emergence of gay or lesbian sexuality does not focus on childhood/s. This has resulted in invisibilising childhoods of gay individuals and more so in homogenizing childhood experiences by assuming everyone to be cisgender and heterosexual. In this study, I highlight through experiential accounts, a sense of difference reported by most study participants right from young age. For most participants this difference was experienced as not a good but a ‘bad difference’. Several participants described their gender transgressions from as early as five and six years in areas such as clothes, grooming, play, preference of play mates. While gender transgressions were common for lesbian women and gay men, their impact and consequences were often different for men and women. Family, parents, friends, schools and colleges often emerged as
normativising institutions, reproducing social norms of ‘appropriate’ behaviors related to gender and sexuality. However respondent stories also include accounts wherein certain transgressions were tolerated through ignoring/invisibilising/not seeing or acknowledging as well as viewing these transgressions as situational, contained within a specific situation or time period, not spilling over into ‘normal’ life.

‘Growing up’ ‘gay’ posed several challenges for the LG child/adolescent, which I argue in chapter three sets the developmental process of gay and lesbian individuals apart from their heterosexual counterparts. Being a minority even in one’s family and among one’s closest friends, finding one’s self in the absence of any gay affirmative language, images, role models, fighting socially internalised messages of abnormality and pathology, dealing with feelings of alienation and isolation; and all of this with absence of external support and internal resources of an adolescent or a young person can be overwhelming to say the least. I use the framework of sexual minority stress (Meyer, 1995) to understand the impact of these unique developmental challenges on the life journeys of gay and lesbian young people.

In describing and analyzing narratives of young gay and lesbian persons about coming out to self and others, meeting community and forming intimate/romantic relationships, I locate these in certain aspects of socio-cultural life in India. These include – presence of a strong cultural script for homosociality, compulsory nature of heterosexual, often endogamous marriage and social and relational nature of identity that is outside of the western individuated, bounded nature of self and identity.

In a highly gender segregated society there are strict rules and norms for interactions between men and women both in the public and the private domain. Furthermore in traditional, patriarchal societies such as ours, there is a clear public-private divide with women often expected to operate primarily within the domestic and private realm and the public, economic and political sphere is seen as the male domain. Thus men engaging with each other on matters of intellectual and political concerns and spending a lot of their time in company of other men is encouraged. Similarly, women sharing their domestic chores and woes with each other is a norm. As a result intimate relationships between members of the same-sex are often interpreted in the Indian context in terms of ‘friendship bonds’ and deep emotional connections that are celebrated within the Indian culture. Thus, homosociality i.e. intimate engagement and social bonds among members of the same-sex is encouraged. Homosociality, especially among women in literature is used to mean a continuum between homosocial and homosexual - women caring for each other, promoting each other’s interests, women’s friendships and bonds and women loving women (Sedgwick, 1985). Hammaren et al (2014) argue that just like women’s homosociality, there can be a horizontal homosociality between men characterized by emotional closeness, intimacy and non-profitable forms of
friendships. In India, there exists a cultural script for homosociality or close bonds among men and among 
women and same-sex romantic/sexual encounters and relationships need to be viewed within this context.

Marriage (read heterosexual) is seen in India as both; compulsory for all and a duty. It marks an 
individual’s entry into adult life. The Indian family severely limits experimentation in the choice of 
partners by adhering to the practice of arranged marriage (Beteille, 1993). Marriage (read endogamous 
marrige) and procreation are necessary to establish one’s social status within one’s family and larger 
clan/community. Even with respect to inter-caste marriage, often the structural distance between members 
of the two castes that intermarray is not too much in terms of the local or regional caste ranking (Kolenda, 
2003). Thus the compulsory nature of marriage and rules about who can marry whom are quite rigidly 
defined. Vanita observes, “In India, most people have been, and many continue to be, married off at a 
very young age. Hence exclusive same-sex relationships are necessarily rare” (Vanita, 2002a: 3). Because 
of the great emphasis on marriage as a marker of adulthood in Indian culture, the consolidation of 
sexuality around ideas of individuated sexuality is less entrenched. Privileging of family values, arranged 
marrige and obligation to marry means that same-sex sexual relationships are not radically disassociated 
from heterosexuality (Vanita, 2002a). In fact the centrality of heterosexual marriage is such that any 
sexual relations outside of it (and by extension outside of the family and community network) are not 
acknowledged and are unthinkable for many. In this study too, forced (overt or subtle) heterosexual 
marrige has been a reality in the lives of many of the participants or their partners. The all pervasive 
nature of this ideology of compulsory marrige means that often gay and lesbian individuals aspire for 
and see their relationships with heterosexual marriages as their reference points. Some narratives of study 
participants reveal this. There are others however who have critiqued the heteronormative instituition of 
marrige and family and have discussed about their network of intimate relationships that go beyond 
blood or conjugal ties.

The Self has been conceptualized in western literature as an individuated, bounded, autonomous self. 
However in many non-western cultures the self maybe expressed in kinship, community and relational 
terms and identity maybe informed by an interdependent view of the self. Familial concerns and filial 
duties are placed in high regard and individuals are much more enmeshed in their social and familial 
relationships. The default presentation of ‘self’ to family and society is a heterosexual one and identity is 
often expressed in social terms such as caste location of one’s family, gender, birth order and so on. 
Hence disclosure or non-disclosure of sexual identity in social life and its implications in terms of 
embracing a ‘gay lifestyle’ as defined by a western liberatory gay discourse needs to be viewed in light of 
the above mentioned discussion on construction and expression of self and identity, wherein sexual
subjectivities may not even translate into an identity based on sexuality. Also there are several layers of situated complexity that inform decision of disclosure/non-disclosure that are embedded in a person’s socio-cultural milieu as opposed to in an intrapsychic struggle implied in western coming out models.

Therefore I argue in this thesis that studying ‘growing up’ ‘gay’ in India will have to take into account the socio-cultural realities and contexts that are discussed here. Compulsory nature of heterosexual marriage, presence of a cultural script for homosociality, expression of self more in relational and familial terms than individualistic ones would impact growing up, identity development, experience of minority stress, stigma and so on.

Finally, studying growing up processes of gay and lesbian individuals can often be confused with attempts at establishing aetiology or causation of homosexuality. Historically such ‘causation’ research in medical science has been conducted with the motivation of knowing and removing the root cause of the ‘abnormal’ condition of homosexuality or changing, converting of such perversion into ‘normal’ heterosexual functioning. I wish to clarify that the current study is an attempt to locate experiences of lesbian and gay individuals within a life course perspective, which includes their personal histories of childhood and growing up years, experiences of institutionalized homophobia within homes, schools, neighborhoods, among friends and their journeys of finding themselves and their communities. The motivation behind this study is to initiate inquiry and understanding about growing up experiences of gay individuals in the Indian context, which would enable parents, families, teachers, child counsellors, activists, academics and policy makers to better understand, counsel, protect and plan relevant programmatic interventions or tweak the existing ones to accommodate needs of young gay and lesbian individuals. It is an attempt to start critical conversations within psychology, social work, childhood studies, family studies and to think about exclusions inherent in these disciplines.