



NIMBLE FEET AND OPEN HEARTS

On a detour from the straight and narrow, **Stuti Agarwal** enters a realm of endless possibilities opened up by asking one question: can we love more than one person at a time?

Photograph: TRIBHUVAN TIWARI

SEATED in a quaint little coffee house in the heart of south Delhi, Prachi Singh and Somak Biswas could, in some ways, pass for just another dating, doting couple, one of many that seem to have taken up permanent residence on the lounge chairs of coffee bars. And yet, in the dull winter light that frames their steaming cups of coffee, it's easy to see that there's an indefinable, inexplicable spark to their relationship. Perhaps it's

just the way they lean into each other as they bantered. Or the casual manner in which Somak reaches out and tucks away a stray strand of hair on Prachi's face. Or the luminous animation that radiates their faces. Whatever it is, it's hard not to miss the fact that this couple is just so into each other. So, what's their secret?

Well, says a smiling Somak, it's an "open secret". The fact is he and she are in an "open relationship".

The concept of polyamory—loosely, of

a relationship where three (or more!) partners isn't a crowd—isn't easy to grasp. But the way Somak disassembles it, it begins to make sense. Sort of. His words could almost make for a First Law of Polyamory. "I believe we are capable of loving more than one person at a time," he says. "Every person fills a different space, and to try making one person fit all the boxes has its problems."

Heteronormative ideas are the first thing that open relationships question.

Why only one partner? What really is infidelity? What does it take to truly love someone? More and more people are questioning these notions.

"The new understanding is that one person cannot bring everything to a relationship," claims relationship counsellor Sanjoy Mukherjee. He recounts a therapy session with a couple during which the girl said she was dissatisfied with her partner in bed, to which he responded by saying, without spite and

Kuchipudi dancers Radha, Raja and Kaushalya Reddy are in an 'open, yet closed' marriage

very comfortably, that she could try out other men. "An open relationship is an understanding between two people who are equal, devoid of any hypocrisy and are making their own rules," says social scientist Shiv Visvanathan. People are increasingly looking to experiment and break the shackles of what is perceived as normalcy, he reasons.

By holding up heteronormativity as its arch-foe, though, one hits a paradox right off. The mental transition from a default monogamous setting to one that can open itself up to the different rhythms of polyamory is no less difficult for the gay individual: the same accusations of excessive randiness and lack of commitment can emanate from the gay community, which is often eager to dispel the image of being hypersexual. Bisexual author Zachary

Zane, who faced off some of this opprobrium, wrote recently that he stuck to his choice because he realised he was “better equipped to handle the struggles that came from polyamory than monogamy”.

There's a cluster of partly overlapping concepts here, each with its specific history and dynamic: they are unified mainly by the idea of a certain liberty in choice. Polyamory would obviously entail loving more than one person, and a scientifically precise definition will have to await the day they first define 'love'. An 'open relationship' is a looser term, of course, and can gesture at any non-coercive, mutually agreed-upon arrangement, with any degree of formalisation. 'Open marriage' comes at the narrower end of the definition spectrum, and is perhaps the most difficult and paradoxical of the three. There's the weight of history to begin with, a species conditioning itself. And 'wedlock', by force of convention, implies monogamy: 'open marriage', to that extent, is almost an oxymoron.

In the 1960s, the term 'open marriage' in the West denoted only the opposite of what in India is known as 'fixed marriage'. Nena and George O'Neill's best-selling 1972 book *Open Marriage: A New Life Style for Couples*, which talked about creating reciprocal zones of equality, with space for each partner to grow as an individual, set the phrase on an unexpected journey. The possibility of physical relations outside marriage that it dwelt on, as a means of building trust, turned the phrase into a byword for a form of sexual laissez faire, way more than the authors intended.

PERHAPS it had to do with the times. The sexual revolution was in full swing and any hint of theoretical validation was bound to be pounced upon. One of the institutionalised experiments in polyamory those days gained considerable fame via Gay Talese's magnum opus on the sexual revolution, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*. This was John and Barbara Williamson's nudist Sandstone Retreat—and what came forth in Talese's participant-observer's recounting was not just the joy of carnality, but something that went to the heart of the human relationship puzzle. For, the really revelatory bit was that, despite members



Prachi Singh and Somak Biswas say mobility in open relationships isn't always about sex

being mostly couples who came volitionally, there was a pattern of distress as their mates partnered off with someone else. Rather than abolish jealousy or possessiveness, free love actually fostered it in that Californian haven.

But experimenting is, by definition, an act that accepts risks—and the new adherents of polyamory in India would gladly go for emotional risks they can be responsible for. “Like every relationship, open ones too have teething problems,” says Sudha Mehta, who has been in an open relationship, with one partner, for five years. And unlike with traditional one-on-one relationships, this has no set rules. “We make our own rules,” says Sudhir Rao, who is in an early-stage open relationship. In fact, this is what many people in open relationships find liberating: everything from start to finish is an experiment. “When I came to Delhi from Lucknow, I wanted to try out everything, including this new, simpler understanding of relationships,” says Prachi.

Getting into an open relationship happened, to most people, as a process of evolution, after one or more monogamous relationships, often with hitches. “I cheated in all my previous monogamous relationships and, after all the guilt pangs, realised I wasn't cut out for

it,” says Sudha. Similar was the case with Kaira Saxena, who after her first relationship at 15, has always been in open relationships. “It started with wanting to know that a lot of people liked me, and went on to understanding that I believe in polyamory,” she confesses. Karan Kaushal, Sudha's partner, too feels the same. “Both my partner and I are good-looking people, who enjoy attention and the sex,” he declares, rather unabashedly.

An easy conviviality, then, without the usual hang-ups. Is the mobility of atoms aided by a loose chemical bonding? Is there bonding at all? Yes indeed, insists Somak, adding that even the mobility isn't always about looking out for sex. “Often you like the company of other people, or make a mental connection,” agrees Prachi. “Or just being with both sexes,” says Somak, who is bisexual, and has been with other men while in an open relationship with Prachi. Sudha, who is also bisexual, hits these notes too: a different kind of fulfilment results from different zones of companionship. And if the whole thing rests on a sexual mosaic of light, flitting patterns, they see no reason why that couldn't be a new normal. At least in a kind of urban class that has been socialised around liberal individualism.

What accounts for the wider acceptance of open relationships? “Social norms, roles and responsibilities have

changed. Priorities have changed, and youngsters want to avoid responsibilities,” says Sameer Malhotra, who heads the Department of Mental Health and Behavioral Sciences at Max Super Speciality Hospital. The couples in open relationships tell you that some of it is about an unwillingness to conform to the “rules” as framed by a puritanical society. “The traditional boyfriend-girlfriend relationship is like a marriage in all but name,” laughs Prachi. Somak adds that these relationships come with a whole set of expectations, insecurities, and, predictably, rancorous disagreements. And yet, even an open relationship comes with its own set of rules. “We did a lot of talking before deciding to get into an open relationship. There are rules, yes, but they are made by us,” says Somak.

Most often, there is only one rule: honesty. “The foundation is great friendship and a shared camaraderie, so we share everything,” believes Sudhir. He candidly admits to dropping his partner to other guys, or picking her up late at night from their houses. Somak and Prachi are each other's “go to” people for everything, even when it comes to advice on other partners. “We check with each other about what to wear on a date or what to do about pregnancy scares,” laughs Prachi. It's almost a happy picture of domesticity in that sense—a sense of a reliable fallback.

OF course, couples in open relationships make up the rules as they go along. And those rules vary from couple to couple. Sudhir and Somak are open to moving out of the relationship in case either of them finds someone else that they want to be exclusive with. Sudha and Kaira see their respective relationships as being the defining one in their lives, and both the couples want to end up married too. “We have plans to get married in the next year or two,” says Mihir Sethi, Kaira's partner. Will it be an open marriage? “We think so, it is just who we are,” says Sudha.

They aren't the first ones to do it. Older instances of open marriages are not entirely unknown—certainly not of “open, yet closed” ones, such as the celebrated one involving Kuchipudi dancers Raja, Radha and Kaushalya Reddy. “I fell in love with my brother-in-law and proposed to him,” reminisces Kaushalya. Her sister Radha agreed, but laid down

one condition: “You can marry him, but not dance with him.” It was perhaps their own ‘open relationship’ rule, but it's one that Kaushalya has lingering regrets over. “My sister got married to Rajaji when they were very young,” she says. “They ran away together to build a career in dance, so I can never share the understanding they have, but I get infinite love from both.”

Visvanathan thinks an open marriage adds an additional dimension to the relationship. “There is a certain playfulness that makes men and women stop behaving like bricks,” he says. “Open relationships have tremendous possibilities.”

Yet, the lessons from the Sandstone Retreat experiment still hold. The first trouble is how widely misunderstood the idea appears to be. “Our friends called us horny and judge us for it even



after years,” says Sudha. Prachi and Somak face the same stereotyping. Ironically, almost everyone in an open relationship tends not to tell their families of their arrangement. “I come from a conventional middle-class family. My mother is a homemaker and dad is in a government job,” says Prachi. “For them, my relationship would be extremely transgressive.” She shudders to even think of the day they find out she is bi-curious. Similarly, Somak's parents don't know he swings both ways. Sudha and Karan moved to Bangalore only months after they met and their families approved, but only because they think the two are girlfriend-boyfriend, a term none of these couples wants to use.

Not everyone, however, has a sanguine outlook on open relationships. “People in open relationships have to battle not just with the world, but also among

themselves,” says psychologist Bani Malhotra. She believes these are surface affairs, wherein, in trying to avoid the drama, you avoid the real person altogether. Counsellor Mukherjee too says the purported openness may be tested when the inevitable question of ‘what next’ crops up, or one of them wants more.

Such a change of equations has been known to happen. “I was with a guy for over a month and he wanted to be exclusive, but I wasn't ready for it,” says Somak. And just as the Gay Talese parable showed, open relationships are not immune to notions of jealousy. “I fear every time he becomes more emotionally connected with someone other than me,” adds Sudha.

Bani, who's a young-adult specialist, reckons that open relationships are something of a rite of passage. “It happens at an age when they want to experiment and break free,” she says. And yet, many of the couples are only caught up in that moment, uncaring about what happens next. “It is a beautiful relationship, in the present. We don't want to think of the future,” says Sudhir. “I know I will grow out of this, but who's keeping track. In the end, we come from traditional families and the end picture is of a couple, with their kids,” adds Kaira.

Is this just a controlled extension of the informality of university, then? As with any relationship, existential questions abound. But they meet the questions with cheerful defiance. “There is uncertainty in any relationship, but for now I would like to avoid the drama of crying at night about why he told me not to wear what I did, why he didn't call me, why he isn't spending enough time, or is he cheating on me,” laughs Somak.

Hours into the conversation with Prachi and Somak, the concept of an open relationship still seems other-worldly. But then, it fell in place in a flash. As Prachi explained her encounters with other people, she lamented the difficulty in finding girls who are “open”. I mention that a bisexual friend of mine was having much the same trouble. “You should hook these two up then,” interjected Somak. And I did, right there. That open-hearted nimbleness, in a nutshell, was what open relationships are about.